

AT THE STROKE OF

THIRTEEN



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**New Horror by
Nicola Cui
and Others**

Edited
By

Thirteen Press

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Meet the Authors:

FIVE MINUTES TO THIRTEEN O'CLOCK

Welcome to the first non-themed book from the new Thirteen Press Imprint of Horrified Press. There's much here that we feel makes it unique and noteworthy but we feel its proudest moment comes from our very special guest star Nicola Cuti.

If you are an aficionado of the world of comic books, animation, and such allied fields, than I don't have to tell you who Nick is, but in case you might not -- say hello to one of popular culture's true renaissance men. Not only can he truly do it all when it comes to such endeavors but indeed has done it excellently and for a long time.

I've long enjoyed and been inspired by his vast output, first as a rabid fan of comic books and later as a practicing pro myself, and someday I will get around to explaining in detail the semi-mystical significance that his renowned *E-Man* had on me and my career, but later for that.

Suffice it to say that Nick that in my opinion few people do horror any better than he does. His classic work on the old Warren black and white comic magazines is more than testimony to that and are absolutely still worth seeking out and more than worthy of seeing print again. Beyond that Nick is one of our industry's true gentleman, down to earth and mellower than someone as talented as he is generally turns out to be when you get to know them.

We editors are very excited to feature his chilling piece "Pizza Face" as the lead-off of this book and hope that he will drop by again to present more such fare within the pages we will be publishing in the not too distant future.

So all of us connected with this title do now dedicate it to Nicola Cuti, modern day and true master of horror and the great magnetic North by which we all assembled here have long aspired to in hopes of finding our way to similar achievement as well.

– ***Ken L. Jones***

PIZZA FACE

Nicola Cuti

When Alyssa Hardy heard the doorbell ring at eight in the evening, her first instinct was not to answer it. It was a good instinct and she should have followed it. She was a teenager alone in a strange house with two children upstairs to protect. The Mercados wouldn't have cared if she answered it or not. They didn't give her any instructions about evening visitors and they hadn't told her they were expecting an important delivery, so she decided to allow the doorbell to ring unanswered. Then she heard the call she could not refuse. It wasn't a cry for help. She would have been suspicious of such a seemingly innocent request, no; this was a different shout she could not ignore.

It went: "Pizza delivery!"

She peered through the peephole in the door and, sure enough, there was a pizza truck at the end of the walk leading to the Mercado house. It said *Speedy Pizza* on the side of the truck and she saw the distorted image of a teenage boy holding of those thermal pizza boxes. She couldn't see much of his face from where he was standing but there was something familiar about it. Maybe it was the horn-rimmed glasses he wore. There was a boy in her school who wore the same glasses.

"I didn't order a pizza," she informed him.

"Sure you did," was his answer. "Isn't this 1301 Madison Street?"

"1301 Maple Street. Madison is across town."

"Oh Jeez," the boy droned. "I did it again. I'm so going to get fired. I'll never get this there on time. I'll have to call in for another delivery. Sorry to have bothered you, Miss."

"S'okay," Alyssa said in relief. "What are you going to do with the pizza?" She suddenly realized she was hungry.

"I'll have to dump it. My boss will be so-sooo pissed off."

"I'll take it, if you give it to me at half price."

"You can have it for free. I'll pay for it. It's worth the ten bucks to keep my job."

Alyssa opened the door for him and was put off guard by the boy's winning smile. He wore one of those white pizza hats with the word "Speedy" printed on the brim but his face, his poor face, had been ravaged by the worst case of acne she had ever seen.

“I know you,” she said. “You’re Jimmy Stentz. You sit in the back of my math class. Mister Hordlow’s class.”

“That’s me, ole Pizza Face.”

“You shouldn’t say that about yourself.”

“You said it. I heard you.”

Alyssa was going to deny it but she had called him Pizza Face a couple of times to her girlfriends. He probably had overheard. She was going to apologize when he walked past her with the pizza and laid the covered box on the living room table.

He saw her panic at his intrusion and reassured her, “I’ve got to slice it for you.”

“It doesn’t come already sliced?”

“That’s the secret for a fresh pizza, sliced at home. I hope you like pepperoni.”

As she came closer to him, Jimmy removed the cardboard box from its thermal covering and placed the pizza box on the covering. Alyssa was relieved to see he took such care not to damage the Mercado’s furniture. Then he stepped back as if inviting her to lift the lid to the box. He was now standing behind her as she opened the box and stared, in confusion, at the pizza which had been sliced up into eight uneven pieces. Jimmy covered her mouth with his left hand and sliced open her throat with a very special pizza cutter. The extra sharp wheel had a rivet in it so it couldn’t spin, making it a very sharp weapon. Jimmy had made it himself.

As Alyssa writhed and gurgled on the floor, spilling her blood in spurts, Jimmy gathered up the cardboard box, slipped it into the thick thermal covering, taking care not to step in the widening pool of Alyssa’s blood. What a shame, Jimmy thought. She was such a pretty girl. She was going out for cheerleading in the fall and was in the class for special students. No doubt she would have gotten into the college she had wanted and made a fantastic account but now all she could do was die. She was already very pale, making her ruby-red lips, swathed with Scarlet O’Hara number three seem even redder. Such a pretty girl. As he passed her, he removed a digital camera from his pocket, and clicked off several photos of the dying girl’s death throes.

I should have apologized for calling him “Pizza Face”, Alyssa thought as consciousness left her, and then I wouldn’t be dying here. Total darkness filled her fading mind and it was over.

* * *

In the tiny room built into the corner of his garage, Matt Santiago's fingers hovered above the keyboard of his word processor. He was having problems with his latest crime drama and was flexing his fingers while waiting for inspiration to strike. He glanced at the shelf where he saw spines of his other eight novels and considered going through one of them. Perhaps a stray sentence might lead him to an idea which could blossom into an entire novel.

A knocking at the side door to the garage, hit his concentration like an explosion, wiping out any threads of ideas from his brain. He saw a red face at the window of the door, glowing weirdly from the bug light on the side of the door. It was Jimmy the pizza delivery boy. Why was he making a delivery at the side door when he should have gone to the front? Gloria, his wife, was home. She would have accepted the pizza and paid him.

"Just bring it inside at the front door," he told Jimmy. "Gloria will take care of you."

"I already made the delivery, Mr. Santiago," Jimmy shouted. "I wanted to speak with you. Mrs. Santiago said you'd be here."

Reluctantly he went to the side door to unlock it for Jimmy, resigned to the fact he wasn't going to be doing any more work that night. Maybe it was for the better. He had been in such a sour mood ever since he had gotten the letter from the new publisher, Marie Soams, he really didn't feel like writing and a rushed novel always reads like a rushed novel. There's no fleshing out of the characters of the situations. It's the same as a short story with a lot of filler added.

"What's up, Jimmy?" he asked casually as he led him to the only other chair in the garage, but he could guess why Jimmy was there. A sheaf of pages were gripped in his hand, three holes along the side held together by a single brass fastener. The cover was bright red and folded in half so Jimmy could keep it in his back pocket whilst he drove the truck. Anxiously, Jimmy held up the pages announcing he had finished, or had almost finished, writing his manuscript.

"Bring it back when you're completely done," Matt told him, "and I'll look it over the way I said I would, I promise."

"Sure, Mr. Santiago, I understand your feelings, but it won't be finished until I'm caught."

“Caught?” what an odd thing to say but the significance of Jimmy’s comment was not lost on Matt. There had been a series of murders in the county, all teenage girls with their throats cut open by a sharp instrument. Matt had two teenage daughters still living with him and his wife, along with a toddler. Now this boy, who he had befriended only a week ago, a boy with a sheepish grin, shyly admitting he had read every one of Matt’s novels and thought Matt was the greatest living writer, maybe even the finest novelist of the mystery genre, ever, was confessing to the murders. Certainly Matt must be reading more significance into the boy’s comment than had been there. Sure, the kid had a novel he was working on and Matt had promised to critique it, but now the novel had taken on a frightening importance. Was it an unfinished confession, an admission of guilt? But perhaps Matt was attributing too much to what Jimmy had just said. He may have been dramatic on purpose, just to catch Matt’s attention.

“You heard me right. I’m that killer the police are searching for,” Jimmy admitted. This was even more incredible. The boy was erasing any doubts Matt might have held to his naivety.

Jimmy held up his manuscript and waved it at Matt as if it were a club. He said it was all in the manuscript, names, dates and details which had never been published. There were even several chapters outlining Jimmy’s thoughts and philosophies about what had driven him to the killings. It was because of girls, sure. They didn’t like him. That wasn’t so terrible but they made fun of him as well. They had said the sausages on the pizzas he delivered were so tiny because his own sausage was so small. And of course they called him Pizza Face. It had felt so good to get back at them, to take power over them by becoming the most important man in their lives, the man who had taken their life. He knew he was eventually going to be caught but he would go on killing those bitches until the day the police arrested him.

Matt told Jimmy to give himself up. Jimmy refused and threatened Matt with the fact that he had two teenage daughters. A chill ran through Matt and his strength drained from his body through the sweat staining his shirt. In one sudden instance it returned and he shoved Jimmy against the wall. He wasn’t certain what he said exactly but he promised to kill him if anything happened to his daughters.

“You mean like this?” Jimmy showed Matt the pictures he had taken at Alyssa’s murder.

“You see what I’m capable of,” he said as Matt released him. “I won’t hurt your girls so long as you help me get my memoirs- published. Just look them over. Fix them up. It can be... ‘as told to Matt Santiago’. That’s fine. But I’ll need the money for my defense.”

The pictures had made everything absolutely clear. Nothing Jimmy recorded in the manuscript was going to be a lie. Every detail would be exact and Matt was enabling him to go on killing so long as Jimmy never touched his own home. He couldn’t allow that.

“There’s a problem,” Matt said weakly. He wondered if he would ever have strength again. He handed Jimmy the letter from his editor. Jimmy unfolded the letter, neatly typed with the Donnelly Publishing letterhead.

It read:

Dear Matt,

We’ve been friends for quite a few years and that’s why I’m writing this letter. We’ve got a new publisher, Marie Soams, and she’s not crazy about your work. She sent out a memo that we were not to print any more of your novels. I told her she was crazy because you were one of our bestselling authors but she said your stuff, and she did say stuff, not my word, promoted violence toward women. Could you cool the “Jack the Ripper” aspect in your next novel or else I won’t be able to get it through. You’ll get an official letter from her a couple of days but I wanted to give you a heads-up. I figured you deserved it.

Best, Mike, Michael Burns, Senior Editor.

Jimmy agreed this was a problem but he asked Matt to go through his manuscript anyway. They would just have to take the final copy to a different publisher.

Marie Soams had just finished her evening shower and had planned on reading the latest manuscript submitted to her office by one of her editors, before going to bed. It was from a female author and she wanted more mysteries from female writers. She wiped herself down lightly, wrapped a towel around her lithe body and poured herself a goblet of Chardonnay wine. She picked up the manuscript and the wine and was heading for her bedroom when the doorbell rang. It might have been her boyfriend; he said he might

stop by. She considered putting on a robe but decided to turn him on by just having the towel around her. Certain that it was her boyfriend, she opened the door only to see a pizza boy with a pockmarked face standing there with a pizza in his hand. She thought about getting the robe and then just figured on giving him the thrill of his youth.

“Pizza delivery,” he said plaintively.

“I didn’t order a pizza,” she explained. She was enjoying his attempts to look away from her near naked body.

“Isn’t this 45? North Maple?”

“You have the wrong address.”

* * *

A few days later, when Jimmy came to see how far Matt had gotten with his manuscript, Matt was very aware of Marie Soams’ brutal murder. Guiltily he wondered if he had sent Jimmy to the unfortunate woman. How else could he explain it? He had shown Jimmy his letter, Marie Soams was an obstacle and she had been removed. The events were vividly replayed in his mind when he looked at Jimmy.

“You killed her,” Matt accused.

“Of course, I did, but don’t worry, it won’t be counted as one of the ‘Slicer’s’ murders. She was much older than the teen girls. The police will investigate and file it away without making any connection. You’re safe.”

“But she’s dead because of me. I told you about her!” Matt said.

“But now you can get the manuscript published. How’s it coming?”

The most frightening thing about the incident was that Jimmy was probably right. Matt hadn’t met Marie Soams, therefore he had no real concern over her life or her demise. She wasn’t going to accept any more of his stories, not because they were poorly written but simply because they had offended some personal mores of hers. Well, if she was going to impose her principles on Matt then maybe she deserved what she had gotten. Matt actually toyed with the idea there might be some other person in his life who needed to be done away with. There was, and Jimmy would be the perfect instrument to wipe away another obstacle. It wasn’t as if Matt had planned a murder, but the right word at the right time and nature would take its course. There was no way to restrict nature. Nature would do what it would do.

"I like your style, Jimmy. Very concise and very clear. I won't have too much to change."

That evening, when Jimmy reported for work at Speedy Pizza to his shift boss, there was already a stack of pizzas on the rack ready to be delivered, with the order slips protruding from the box lids.

"Better get going, Jimmy," the shift boss said.

"What about the kitchen? You said you'd let me work in the kitchen. I told my Mom and she was so excited for me. I thought I was going to start there tonight."

"Not tonight," he said sourly. "I told the boss and he said he couldn't let you in there with your face. Health reasons."

"It'll clear up."

"And when it does, I'll put you in the kitchen. Promise."

"Yeah," Jimmy said as he grabbed three of the boxes. "Everybody promises."

His mother would ask him about the kitchen. She had started as a pizza cook and had expected Jimmy would one day follow in her footsteps. What did they think I was going to do in the kitchen, rub the pizza dough on his face? He hated the idea of facing her with another disappointment. His dad, who had left them years ago, was German but his mother was old-world Sicilian and was so proud of him when he had told her he had gotten work in a pizza parlor. She pushed him to ask for the job in the kitchen and when his shift boss told him there was an opening, Jimmy applied for it and was first in line to get it. But they wouldn't give it to Pizza Face.

As he was loading his van, one of the girls from the kitchen came over to him and shoved a tube of face cleanser in his hand. She was a cute Italian gal with dark, curly hair all pushed under a hair net. She told Jimmy nobody should talk to him like that and this would help. The formula in the tube would clear up his face in a week, two tops. It worked wonders for her brother.

"That's real nice of you, Gina," Jimmy said graciously as he accepted the tube. "I'm wondering... I mean, if you're free after shift maybe I could buy you a cup of coffee and a Danish. I know a little all night coffee shop..."

"That's real nice of you, Jimmy, but... well, I've got a boyfriend... and..."

Jimmy tensed up. "You told me yesterday you wished you had a boyfriend. When did you get one?"

She stammered for a few seconds but when Jimmy pulled out his special pizza cutter and sliced open her voice box, she didn't say anything else, ever again.

Jimmy knew his temper had caused him to hit too close to home. Besides, he liked Gina and had no intention to harm her but his Sicilian temper got in the way. Now he was no longer a serial killer with a mission of revenge on those who had teased him, he was just a killer. Before, his days had been numbered, now he was counting his freedom by the hour. His last desperate act was to seek out Matt Santiago and see if his manuscript was ready.

He drove to Matt's garage and was relieved to see the light burning in his studio/office. He had to calm himself down before he spoke to Matt. A nice offering of pizza would do the trick and he pulled a fresh one from the rack. It was just what Matt usually ordered, white pizza with spinach. Perfect. He slipped it into a thermal cover and walked cheerfully toward Matt's door. When Matt came to the door, Jimmy smiled and showed him the pizza.

"On the house," Jimmy said, "and it's your favorite."

Matt didn't smile as he walked Jimmy inside. Jimmy set the pizza on a table made of two sawhorses and a slab of plywood, but it was obvious Matt wasn't enthusiastic about it. Jimmy asked what the problem was. Did it concern the manuscript?

"It's more personal, Jimmy. There's this girl, Prissy Lawson, she babysits for us. She goes to your school. Maybe you know her?"

Jimmy shook his head.

"Anyway, she babysits for our little one, sometimes. It seems one night I was bringing her home and we were just talking, you know, about sex. Her boyfriend keeps pushing her, but she wants to stay pure until her wedding night. She doesn't mind fooling around but she won't go all the way. So, we're talking and she grabs my crotch playfully and I grab her boob. And well... bingo. All the way."

Jimmy whistled but keeps listening.

"She's all sorry it happened and she's screaming and she says she's going to tell everyone I ruined her."

"So, what do you do, Matt?"

Matt stared hard at Jimmy. He couldn't believe the boy was so calm, but then what could he expect from a serial killer? He forced himself to think

of Jimmy in just that way, not as a poor, mixed-up kid, but as his weapon. One more killing and all the roadblocks to his career would be gone. Soams had been vanquished so easily and now it was Lawson's turn.

"I didn't do anything, Jimmy. I'm not a killer, but maybe you could do it. It's your thing."

"I got nothing against her."

"You do," Matt said, "I told her about you and she said she knew you. She called you the Pizza Face in her cafeteria."

Jimmy became enraged, not because he believed Lawson had called him a Pizza Face, but because he knew she hadn't. It was so obviously a made up thing Matt had created to manipulate him and he resented the loss of respect Matt had shown toward him. He had bared his soul, his precious manuscript, to Matt because he trusted him as a friend and now he was being treated as if he were no more than an animal, a dog to be released on Matt's enemies.

"You're lying, I'm not buying that," Jimmy said. "What do you think, I'm your stooge or something? You can just send me out on a contract? It doesn't work that way."

"Jimmy, you gotta help me. This girl is going to ruin my family, my life!"

Jimmy got up off his chair to leave but Matt grabbed him by the smock and tried to sit him back down. That's when Jimmy pulled out his special pizza cutter with the rivet. Matt saw the killing device in Jimmy's hand and tightened his grip around Jimmy's wrist with the fingers of his right hand. Matt and Jimmy struggled, pushing each other against the sheetrock walls of the garage. Jimmy pushed Matt, sending him crashing through a section of broken wall. Fragments of the chalky stone and dust flew out from the blow but Matt managed to yank the cutter from Jimmy's hand. In a frenzy of blind fury, Matt slashed at Jimmy's face and cut him over and over. Jimmy fell back into the plywood table, falling through the pizza box. Matt continued to slash until Jimmy's chest and stomach were little more than ripped ribbons of flesh and gore dangling from bones.

When the police arrived, Matt was tranquil, insanely tranquil for the first time that evening and invited the officers to join him for slices of his pizza. He pointed to the torn body lying on the steaming pie on the plywood table and said, in a chillingly soft voice, "It's a delicious pizza—with everything on it."



THIRTEEN

Timothy Frasier

Oh, you ill-fated number that stirs the witch's heart
So many shun you and try to set you apart
Some become edgy when on Friday you coincide
Fearing your devilish tricks they choose to stay inside

On so many levels you are at my very core
You're the magic number that rested on my door
Always around me, of you I have no fear
Whenever I choose a number, it's you I hold dear

From the very beginning, you've shown your perfect form
All the numbers equaled you on the day that I was born
The bus I rode on the way to school wore your beauty mark
I never felt you were an evil number allied with the dark

The year I finished school, there you were with me
All seemed blind to your power, am I the only one to see
The day and year of my marriage, again you were my friend
You whirl about me so many times like a soul in the wind

Most of my friends know your face and were touched by your hand
Some by the dates in their lives or the marks on their land
There must be some meaning, of this I do not lie
I do believe you'll be at my side on the day that I die.

IT LIVES IN US

Thomas Brown

Spring, Summer and Fall fill us with hope; Winter alone reminds us of the human condition.

– Mignon McLaughlin, *The Second Neurotic's Notebook*, 1966

I

A black frost spread across Lynnwood, icing the tarmac with a lustrous sheen. Street lights were visible; pools of orange in the ice, but they were few and shone dully into the night. The village was dark and still, but it would not remain still for long. Something stirred inside the residents of Lynnwood, something hungry, and on this night it would not be quietened.

Standing in the front room of his family cottage, Michael Collins studied the empty street. He clutched a tumbler of brandy – an old, thick-cut glass, inherited from his father – and stared out through the window to the street beyond.

It was the same every year, beginning around four with the setting sun. First one dog – usually the Rankins' from across the street – then a second, a third, until every dog in village howled and spat with salivary terror. In the following hours, their feral chorus became the only sign of life about Lynnwood. Families locked their doors, closed their garages, bolted shut windows. The young ones were ushered quickly to bed. And the old ones took up watch. They poured stiff drinks – those made a flowing trade, in Lynnwood – and they drank while they listened to the dogs, to the rabid madness in their howls. They drank and they remembered the year past.

Michael listened as the last dog trailed off into silence. His face scrunched up, reflected in the dark glass of the window. It was a tired face, he thought, barely recognising the alien eyes staring back at him. Thinning hair. Bruised eyes. Slack skin; as though any moment he might slough it from his bones to reveal a smiling, carefree man twenty years his junior beneath. It didn't happen.

“Is it over?” Sarah's voice, from the kitchen, soft but probing.

“Love...”

“The dogs, I mean. Those awful cries. Is it over?”

If anything, his face grew tighter. He knocked back the last of his brandy which burned its way down his throat, then coughed into the back of his hand. "It's over, love."

By which he meant that it was just beginning. For the market village of Lynnwood, Winter Solstice was the longest and darkest night in more than one sense. It was a night of old traditions, of ancient tithe and quiet terror. Parents would stand watch whilst their children slept. And the children would dream; gluttonous dreams birthed from their parents' love of liquor, from overindulgence, from too much want and lack of need. He did his best to put the night from his mind; concentrated instead on something else.

Tomorrow was a Thursday – market day in Lynnwood. This close to Christmas it would be heaving, the villagers come to inspect the market's offerings. And the markets were special. Nowhere else in Hampshire could you find a finer selection of local preserves, freshly produced and sickeningly sweet, courtesy of the Allwoods. Mr. Shepherd's metalwork was of particular interest to Sarah, who loved browsing the various Celtic brooches when they took walks there in the mornings. And Catherine Lacey sold the very best in mulled wines. They were hot, spiced and ready to drink, or else bottled and taken home for cold winter nights. He had more than a few bottles himself, sitting patiently in a rack on the kitchen worktop.

"They'll be here soon, then," she said. "Gibbering into the night like every Midwinter, scratching at the door, tapping at the windows –"

"It's over, love. It's over." A pause, before, acting on his thoughts, he snatched the curtains tightly together. Oak Street shrank between the closing fabric; then was gone. Turning, he moved stiffly across the room and collapsed onto his sofa. "Stick the kettle on, would you? I'm parched."

"Your brandy?"

"Done."

By means of an answer, there was a single, mechanical click from the kitchen. It was a tiny, mundane sound and yet it filled the silent house with its presence. Michael's chest tightened as his eyes flickered helplessly to the curtains.

Yes, they *would* visit the market tomorrow. He wanted to pick something out for Sarah, for Christmas – she'd shown him a number of pieces on Mr. Shepherd's stall already – and they needed supplies for the

family lunch anyway. The last market before Christmas was always the busiest. People needed the distraction. It took their minds off other things.

A second click, followed by the splash of water and the clink of a spoon against china. His left hand gripped the armrest, began to tremble, grew white.

"Tea," muttered Sarah from behind him. She placed the steaming mug onto the coffee table and hovered there uncertainly. "Your tea, Michael. Although how you can even think of food or drink, on a night like this –"

"I'm thirsty –"

"I'm terrified." Her lips parted; paused, then clamped shut again. All the while, her eyes remained fixed on the curtains. Those pale blue eyes he loved so much, soft as her voice or a butterfly's wings. "I'm terrified."

He heard her voice; the words that spilled too quickly, then too slowly, from her mouth. He took a brisk sip of his drink. Then he rose to his feet and moved towards her, behind her, his arms finding her waist. He marvelled at how slim she'd stayed after all these years. She always had been the better looking of the two of them.

His thumbs smoothed her jumper, rubbing small, circular motions; rhythmic and soothing against the thin wool. It felt warm, familiar. Gradually, his breathing deepened. The silence settled over them before she broke it again.

"I can't do this much longer."

"We've been through this, love –"

"I don't care about myself. Don't get me wrong, I've had a good run. *We've* had a good run. But Daniel..." Her stomach tensed under his touch; maternal terror, inherent sin or perhaps acute indigestion. "He's twelve, Michael. Twelve. It's no life, with this night hanging over him, those monsters, like a cloud of flies around a bin, a corpse –"

He asked her something then, which he'd long since felt inside of him, but had been unable to put into words before tonight. He thought the words might choke him, but they came out easily enough now that he knew what he wanted to ask.

"Do you regret moving here? Meeting me?"

"Mike..."

"If you could go back years, to that day we met, would you do things differently?"

She moved in his arms, half-turned to him, those tired eyes – almost grey, in the lamp light – seeming to catch his own. “I love you. I always have and I love Daniel and this cottage and Lynnwood. The village’s lovely, it really is – ” She broke off into a sob, sagged into his arms, clung to him while she wept.

It was as though her words had unchained some monstrous appetite. She heard it first; she must have done, for she tensed again beneath her jumper. Then he heard it too; a low rumbling, as of a starving stomach, or the thundering hooves of Gwynn ap Nudd and those of his Wild Hunt, from the stories of Michael’s childhood. The sound droned into the night; a hive of activity against the icy stillness, as in the front room of Granary Cottage Michael held his wife tightly.

And Lynnwood trembled, for they all knew what that sound meant.

II

They checked the doors first. The locks. Those were the most important things. Then Michael drew the curtains while Sarah checked on Daniel. She crept quietly into his room, light spilling from the hallway across his clothes-strewn carpet – such a messy boy! – and went to stand at his bedside. He was just as she’d left him when she’d checked twenty minutes earlier. She glanced once more at the hallway, then turned her back to the light to study her sleeping son. She ran a gentle hand through his hair, compelled to touch him, to certify he was still there.

He turned, murmured, sighed softly in his sleep. He was just a boy. So small, so thin beneath his covers. She thought he’d always be a boy, to her, no matter how he grew up, or what he became. A mother’s love was unconditional. And, of course, she would do her best to raise him right in the meantime. If Lynnwood was good for anything, it was that. Most of the year round, at least.

She could remember little of her own childhood which seemed so long ago now, but she knew it had been difficult; the first time in her life when she thought she had something to hide from others. Difficult enough without the added pressure that Lynnwood imposed over them all; that unspoken evil which swept through their village for one night each year. It was monstrous and yet the true atrocities of the night went forgotten the

morning after. How did they not remember? Year on year, why did they forget?

The room was still and as silent as the rest of the house. It could have been a photograph; a greyscale snapshot in time, except photographs lasted. How long would this last, she wondered? How long before this memory faded? Would she too forget in the morning? She licked her lips, continued to stroke her son's hair. He had her father's features. Funny how such things skipped generations. It was his eyes, his mouth. She missed her father on nights like this; his strength, his stubborn sense of purpose. She thought, once, that she had inherited those same traits from him; had been told as much as by her mother, when she'd insisted she was moving away with Michael. Remembered words stung her in the darkness of Daniel's room. Fling. Cheap. No-good-Godless-man.

She hadn't listened. What did her mother know? She hadn't been to the New Forest; she hadn't visited Lynnwood for herself. She couldn't possibly have known its beauty, its bucolic charm.

None of it mattered now. It was too late for sense or questions. The fugue that held them for the rest of the year had lifted, as it always did on this night and she remembered fully the horrors that awaited them. It was too late to run. God forbid you were caught outdoors on Winter Solstice.

The memories were flooding back now. Horrible sounds, innocuous enough, except that she *knew*. She remembered. The tapping of fingernails on glass, her first year in the village. The strangled yelp, that night when one dog had not stopped howling. The Ashford's family Vauxhall in a ditch by the crossroads, high-beams streaming, rucksacks, clothes and entrails for two meters in all directions. She had been there, the next morning. Walked through the scene. Picked up the stuffed bear that had belonged to their little girl. And she had not remembered how, or why, or anything of that poor family at all, until now...

Daniel moaned, disturbed, and she realised she'd been grasping his hair. She released her grip, shushed him, the slipped silently from the room. For another twenty minutes, anyway. She would not leave him long. It was the children they came for.

Families would be found, tomorrow, broken apart across their sitting rooms. Husbands plastered bloodily to their armchairs. Wives in pieces down the landing, both devoured; great strips torn from their backs, limbs and breasts removed, as though they were livestock and nothing more, like

the pigs kept by McCready. Some years only the bones were left, sobering and sick in the cold light of morning, the occupants of Lynnwood, reduced to their grinning, fleshless cores.

Of the children of these families, there was nothing left. Nothing, except the fibres of hair found on their pillows, or gently rocking play-toys, still moving in the morning. What happened to them was anyone's guess. It was not something Sarah liked to think about on the one day of the year that she could remember it.

She made her way back through the house, switching each light off as she passed. Night spilled into the hallway, the bathroom, the sitting room. She rejoined Michael in the kitchen. He had returned to the brandy; the bottle she'd been saving for Christmas sat opened on the worktop. She retrieved a glass from the cupboard and poured herself a precise measure. It smelled warm, aromatic, and of Michael. He did love a drink in the evenings.

"I've got the lights," she muttered between sips.

"And Daniel?"

"Sleeping."

He nodded, watching her as she drank. 'Feels better if you knock it back.'

"What?"

He raised his glass. 'Down in one, love.'

"I'm savouring it."

He didn't argue – he knew better than that, she liked to think – but continued to stare into his own drink, swilling the caramel coloured liquid around the cut glass tumbler. In truth, there was nothing to savour except the scratchy hotness as it slid down her throat. Somehow, though, that was enough. She gave no outward sign of her discomfort, just studied her husband from across the room.

The kitchen light shone upon him, revealing his tiredness in the dark circles around his eyes, the lines around his mouth. Laughter lines, cutting into his face as though with a knife. The irony wasn't lost on her. Lynnwood - their smiling, carefree community, hiding a deadly secret like the sharp teeth of Man behind his lips. Wasn't that the point of a smile? To mask something behind it?

Another sip, stinging her lips and throat; she tried to remember when she'd last felt such bitterness. Probably a year ago today, she thought.

They heard it again, then; that bass drone, like a swarm of bees, growing louder and louder in the air.

“Wasn’t his report good last week?” she spoke quickly. Her hand shook and she was glad for the fact that there were no ice cubes in her drink.

Michael nodded, unsmiling, eyes fixed firmly on hers. “That PE teacher, Jones, he seemed impressed.”

“And his tutor. She said he was really coming into himself. Showing promise.”

“We need to keep an eye on him.” Louder now, buzzing as if inside her head. She could barely hear what Michael was saying, had to watch his lips as he spoke. “Make sure he stays on track. Not like that Briggs boy; or the Rankins’ son over the road. Now he’s a strange one.”

“I feel sorry for him. Always off on his own – ”

Abruptly, the roaring drone stopped. Then, from somewhere in the village, a scream cut through the night.

Sarah’s heart raced against her ribs. She clutched the work surface, her eyes brimming, and stared at Michael accusingly.

“You said it was over.”

“The dogs, love, the howling.”

“You said it was over.”

He shook his head, swallowed back his drink, his own eyes shining. “It’s not over. You *know* it’s not over. They’re here.”

III

Shadows, stretching for his window. Thin black limbs, reaching for the glass. White figures in the moonlight; scrawny arms clutching at the thatched roof, faces long and pale and pained. Then sounds; clicking, like of tongues against the hollows of their mouths, or the cracking of joints, and a rank stench, like unwashed teeth, as the shadows swarmed closer, a hungry hive, descending on Granary Cottage –

Daniel woke slowly in the darkness of his bedroom. Clutching his sheets, he struggled into a sitting position. He felt hot and damp. Sweat plastered his chest and beneath his arms and he wiped himself down on his covers. What time was it? There was a clock on his bedside table, but he couldn’t see its face in the darkness. Beside it was his radio alarm, with its

light-up screen and digital setting – God forbid he was ever late for school! – but that had died. It must have run flat sometime in the night.

His throat was sore in that way it always went when his mother didn't tuck him in properly. As he coughed into his shoulder, he reached for the glass of water beside his bed, sipped slowly. He hoped he grew out of the throatiness; it was nice when his mother tucked him in, but she couldn't do it forever. He'd be the laughing stock of Lynnwood! If Rob or Chris or Andy found out, he'd never live down the shame.

Finishing his water, he decided he needed the toilet. Replacing the glass on the side, he kicked off his covers and slipped from bed.

Shadows fled from the movement, the curtain caught a breeze. For a moment he struggled to differentiate between dream and reality. His chest tightened. Why was his window open, in December? Did they want him to catch a cold? He pattered across the floor, reached for the window latch and closed it.

Wind buffeted the frosted glass, rising like a scream into the night, then was still.

Standing there, Daniel stared out over Oak Street. It was a very different place by night, he realised. The road stretched on down the street like frozen syrup. Gardens glittered with frost, which clung like grains of sugar to front lawns. And everything black, as though coated in liquorice. It was like a chapter out of that book his mother had used to read him, when he was little: *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. All that was missing was the swarm of small, child-like men, rushing through the darkness –

Another rush of wind, another scream and his reflection twisted, unsettled. He put the thought quickly from his mind and turned instead to food. His fingers poked curiously at his tummy and he realised he could probably sneak downstairs. The cottage was quiet, but it was late and he knew where to tread. He'd done it a hundred times before, when everyone thought he was sleeping. One time his mother and father had even been up, gripped by the news or something equally boring on television and he'd still managed to slip into the kitchen behind them.

Stretching, he turned from the window, from the cold, sugary blackness of the world outside, but not before he saw it. Long, apish arms clutching the window frame. And pressed up against the other side of the glass, as far away as he'd been seconds earlier, a face. White, gaunt, like

that of an old man, but horribly childish, staring in through the first-floor window.

IV

The second scream was not long waiting. Then a third, and a fourth and yet more until Michael lost count of the sounds. He was reminded of a fairground; the way the children shriek excitedly from the merry-go-round, their eyes bright, faces long, little fingers clutching plastic reins as they ride round and round in an endless cycle of joy. He had never enjoyed fairground rides as a child. Now he remembered why.

Sarah marched across the kitchen, fumbled for the light switch and plunged them into darkness. The brandy smelled stronger with the lack of light, suffusing the shadows with fiery warmth. He could hear other things now, too; the wind as it rushed outside, his blood pounding in his ears, those screams...

"They won't find us," he said. Sarah's silhouette moved to the knife-block anyway and retrieved two of the black-handled blades. They made a keen sound as they slid from the solid wood.

She made her way slowly around the kitchen until she was standing right in front of him. She smelled sweetly; that honey-scented shampoo she'd bought from Mrs. Wilks at market last Thursday. Her breath was soft and quick against his face. His Sarah. He wrapped her in his arms, felt the cold, flat side of a blade pressing into his chest. It was strangely comforting.

"They won't find us," he repeated. "Not in the dark."

She nodded. "Then tomorrow we'll figure something out. Everyone will be drinking at the Hollybush, we can slip away –"

"Tomorrow we won't know any better. You know how it is. The deaths last winter. The New Forest round-up of the year before that, when all those ponies were found slaughtered. That one made the headlines, remember? Went regional. And every year, the missing children..."

She stiffened in his arms. "I'll find a way. We can't do this anymore."

They both knew she meant Daniel. It wasn't that Michael didn't care for his son – that couldn't be further from the truth – but Midwinter had hit Sarah strangely this year. She was distressed, upset, where usually the lifting fugue left resignation. He'd seen it before over the years, but never quite this badly. There was no escaping their troubles. Could she not see

that? There was no outrunning this night. It was a part of them all, through and through.

He'd been born in Lynnwood, grown up here, spent his whole life walking these quiet streets. The New Forest was his home and he'd be damned if he'd be driven out. Not by the cold snap of '89, which had coincided so typically with the death of their boiler; not by the ugly refurbishment on the outskirts of village and certainly not by the Midwinter tithe. No matter how many the hunger took.

"You think he'll be better off elsewhere? Lynnwood has its troubles, Sarah, but it's no different to any other village."

She made a strange sound; strangled, hysterical almost, from the back of her throat. He could feel her eyes on him, even in the darkness, staring intently. "Have you ever heard of those things anywhere else? Do they stalk through Lyndhurst, too? What about London?"

"There's worse than this in London, love. We should think ourselves lucky. You've only to watch the news –"

"Cowes, then? Let's move back. I still have friends there, some family –"

"You're not listening to me. There's no escaping people –"

Something moved behind the kitchen window and she silenced him with her hand. They couldn't see it through the curtains, but they could hear it; a long, scraping sound across the glass. It might have been the rose bush in their front garden; the plant often moved under the wind and, when it did, its tough stalks scratched the window. They'd planted it together when Sarah had first moved in, all those years ago and it had thrived ever since. Plants didn't grow well in Lynnwood, but somehow the bush had thrived.

Except it wasn't the rose bush at the window. Not on this night. They stood and listened as the figure inspected their home, testing the glass, the latches, as if testing Michael himself. It moved quietly, respectful of the traditions that held the tithe in place, whatever they may be. No one living knew the rules any more. No one knew anything, except to stay indoors, out of harm's way. No one even knew what they looked like, the *things* that came with the hunger. Monstrous and inhuman, surely. Stories – no, more than that, memories – rose in Michael, bedtime tales told to a little boy by lamplight:

"...and a great many huntsmen stormed the night sky; lean and long with bright, burning eyes. They were huge and hideous as they crossed over

Frey Ford and into Lynnwood, entangled with bracken from the woodland beneath. And in the night the people of Lynnwood heard their horn-calls, shrieking and bellowing, and the thunder of their horses' hooves, the Wild Hunt come to the Forest..."

These were no horsemen, he knew that much, but they were hunters all the same and the people of Lynnwood were their prey. There were no spears, just the ancient remnants of an ancient act, which had somehow endured the passing centuries, when everything else ancient had crumbled and was no more.

There was something special in that sanctity. Sarah could never understand, but what they had here needed preserving. It existed for a reason, no matter how horrible.

"The way of things..."

"Quiet," she begged, "Michael, please."

They stood quite still for what seemed like the longest time. He had no way of knowing just how long, in the darkened kitchen, but it didn't matter. Even long after the figure passed them over, they remained unmoving.

Let it feast on someone else, he thought. Let Sarah and him live another year. Guilt festered inside of him and he drew comfort from the knowledge that tomorrow this would be forgotten. Not just the hunger, terrible though it was, but the shame of acceptance, of submission, like a sickness in his stomach.

Maybe that was the real source of the fugue's strength. They wanted to forget, to release themselves of guilt, to eat heartily each day, sleep soundly each night. There was nothing to be gained from remembering this nightmare. And so they forgot it. Man, the Great Deceiver.

"We're safe," he whispered despite himself, when he was sure the thing at the window was gone. They had heard it as it scaled the side of the cottage, then nothing for the longest time. "For another year, we're safe."

Sarah detached herself from his arms, placed the knives with a clatter on the work surface. Her small stature belied her strength of words.

"I meant what I said. Tomorrow I'm leaving. With Daniel."

"You'll forget, love."

"How? How can I forget something like this? You've grown up with it, Michael, but I haven't. It feels wrong, like an upset stomach, a cancer inside of me. Tell me, how can I forget that?"

“Because that’s what it feels like.” His voice sounded certain in the darkness. “That’s what it feels like to be alive.”

Silence carried on the shadows. The dark always brought out the truth, he realised. Stripped of everything but blackness, the truth had nowhere to hide anymore. Like all of Lynnwood, he had never liked the dark. He’d just never remembered why.

It was then that they heard another scream. Not distant or faceless, but the opposite; loud, clear, and from upstairs. Daniel’s room. Daniel’s voice. His heart raced in his chest, his legs like stone; the darkness melting around him as Sarah snatched up a knife and ran.

V

She took the stairs three at a time. That was her first mistake; in the darkness she slipped, fell forwards. The knife blade cut her arm. Pain flared, followed by a flowing numbness.

She didn’t care. Worse than Daniel’s scream was the silence that had followed. It smothered the pain so that nothing else mattered but her son. Her only son. Her little boy.

She rushed across the landing and into Daniel’s room. It was black and chill, the only source of light that of the moon, through the window. The curtains whipped under the wind and she stared around her, the familiar suddenly so unknown.

It took a moment for her eyes to adjust and then she saw Daniel, not in bed but crouched in the corner of the room. She felt a rush of euphoria on seeing him, which melted with sickening steadiness into dread as her eyes refocused and she realised something was wrong.

Her son was rocking on his haunches, his head held in his hands. His hair was a tousled mess – he could not have been long out of bed – and tears streamed down his cheeks. She only saw them because they caught the moonlight, giving his pale face a white, glittering appearance. So beautiful, so innocent, even in his terror.

She made a move towards him, only half-aware of the long face staring through the window. Daniel was her world. She was sure any parent would say the same, but did they really mean it? These mothers and fathers who lingered in Lynnwood, year on year, subjecting their children to the annual tithe; a lottery of chance, or maybe more than that. A lottery of *life*,

or so Michael seemed to believe. She'd been guilty of the same for too long now. It was time to leave.

The realisation, which should have struck her down, registered with calm clarity: there would be no tomorrow in Lynnwood. Whether they stayed and forgot, or fled and survived, or the other, there was no future here. The cycle was not seasonal, as she'd tried for so long to convince herself. There was nothing natural, nothing beautiful, nothing respected in the local tithe. It was abhorrent.

Half-way across the room she faltered, brought to a standstill by the pained, contorted face, the spidery limbs, the hunger in the eyes of the figure at the window. As she watched, it brought a thin, wasted arm to the window pane, pressed a childish palm against the glass and tapped. Each clack of its nails undid a part of Sarah's mind, memories spilling forth as though from a wound.

Then she dragged her son from the room and down through the darkened house, conscious all the while of those bulging eyes, burning into her back.

The long stretch of the corridor, in front of her, then the top of the stairs. Michael, standing at the bottom.

"Daniel – " he said.

"He's fine."

"Are they here? Are we chosen?"

"The car," she said simply.

Confusion swept her husband's face. He looked different, changed by the darkness. "The car?"

"They're here. For us, for our son. We're leaving."

She strode past him, Daniel in tow, into the hallway. The little boy clung to her, his fingers cold and hard, clasped tightly in her own. There would be no breaking that grip, no breaking that bond, not tonight or any night.

Her free hand hesitated over the chain lock. She turned, stared at Michael in the darkness, felt him staring back. The seconds stretched into silence, broken only by Daniel's whimpers. For a second, she thought Michael would not follow. Then he snatched up his keys from the old oak table in the hallway and moved beside her and all three of them stepped out into the night.

Lynnwood pressed down on them, as vast and black as the waters of the Channel. For one paralyzing moment, Sarah thought she might drown in that night; the sheer volume of darkness washing over her. The icy air stung her lungs and she struggled to draw breath. Then she felt Daniel's fingers between hers, and she forced herself into movement.

Their grey Volvo glistened with frost and the door stuck fast when she tried to open it. Her breath came fast and white on the air, as did something else. Movement down Oak Street; shapes scuttling closer, converging on Granary Cottage. One and two at first, then more as they were drawn through the night; spiders to their struggling prey.

She wrenched the door free and all three of them crawled inside just as the swarm reached them. Night pressed up against the windows and with it those shapes. They clambered across the bonnet and over the roof, scratched at the metal, bit into the wing-mirrors. And the sounds – such *sounds*, as their fingers scraped the paintwork, as they chewed into glass and plastic.

From the cold interior of the Volvo, Sarah and her family stared at the creatures of Lynnwood. She watched as their jaws dislodged, as needle-like teeth gnashed together and she finally understood. Beside her, Michael fumbled with the ignition, but it didn't matter anymore, because she realised he'd been right.

There was no escaping that hunger.

This close she saw them, saw into their eyes, into the sharp turn of their lips, their desperate breaths - and, most sobering of all, she recognised these things. These weren't monsters any more than they were people. Mr. Shepherd. Catherine Lacey. McCready. Michael's words sunk solemnly into place.

It was several minutes before the windshield cracked and the first ragged hand reached inside. Michael fought it off as Sarah clung to Daniel, wrapping him entirely in her arms and not letting go. Not when they grasped Michael, not when they dragged him bodily from the car, not even when Daniel himself began gnawing on her arm.

Her stomach lurched as the truth behind the missing children sank in. It made sense to her now, this truth; the village's hungry heritage, passed on each Midwinter to its young. How had she ever thought they could endure this? How had any of them believed they could hide – from themselves – beneath that fugue of ignorance?

Even as the next figure stretched into the car, even as her son tore into her forearm with his little teeth, she held on tightly and wept for the gluttonous children of Lynnwood.

TERMINATION MANAGEMENT

David S. Pointer

When thirteenth hour
monsters started seeking
the outpatient services of
interplanetary plastic facial
or robotic body surgeons, you
could no longer push a few
selection buttons on a vintage
brothel token vending machine
watching thin garroting wire
and wine slide down or drop
reporting for nocturnal service
against a zombie pin up girl
or other manageable monster
elevating their gangrene days
into invisibility action plan
nights where unscarred fusion
between sex, power and meat
chunk misunderstandings led
to one party leaving the scene
using a Victorian skirt lifter as
a toothpick and another, dead,
unkissed, waiting for back-up
and camera crews scared off
quick as provocative film clip
funeral flies atop morgue ice

MY BROTHER'S KEEPER

Dorothy Davies

From church to home is exactly two thousand three hundred and forty one steps. I cross three roads, which means I step up and down six kerbs. I saw thirty two cars and four omnibuses. This day I saw no dogs. I did see forty seven seagulls and thirty two crows.

I saw seventeen people who were not in church. I saw twenty five people who were in church. I saw twenty four people who were not there for any real reason I could see. The preacher was the only person who seemed “right” in my reasoning. I did not see myself in church, so I did not count myself as being in the congregation. I worried about this, should I have looked at myself in a mirror and counted myself as being there? Would the calculations be wrong?

Today the preacher spoke for ninety seven minutes and forty five seconds. I did not count his words. I feel a loss within myself that I did not do so but I was distracted by his sermon and my need to think about whether I should be included in the congregation count. I needed to resolve that in my mind.

The preacher spoke at length on the topic of “Am I My Brother’s Keeper.” He concluded that we were so, that we had a responsibility to take care of each other, no matter who we were and what we did.

I saw the twenty four people in church shifting in their pews and wondering how they could do this without putting any strain or effort on their mundane lives. I knew then I was right not to count myself among them.

I am my brother’s keeper. I have no need of wondering how I could do such a thing and not put a strain or effort on my mundane life. I wanted to tell the preacher when we left that I was a true keeper of my brother, but feared he would not understand.

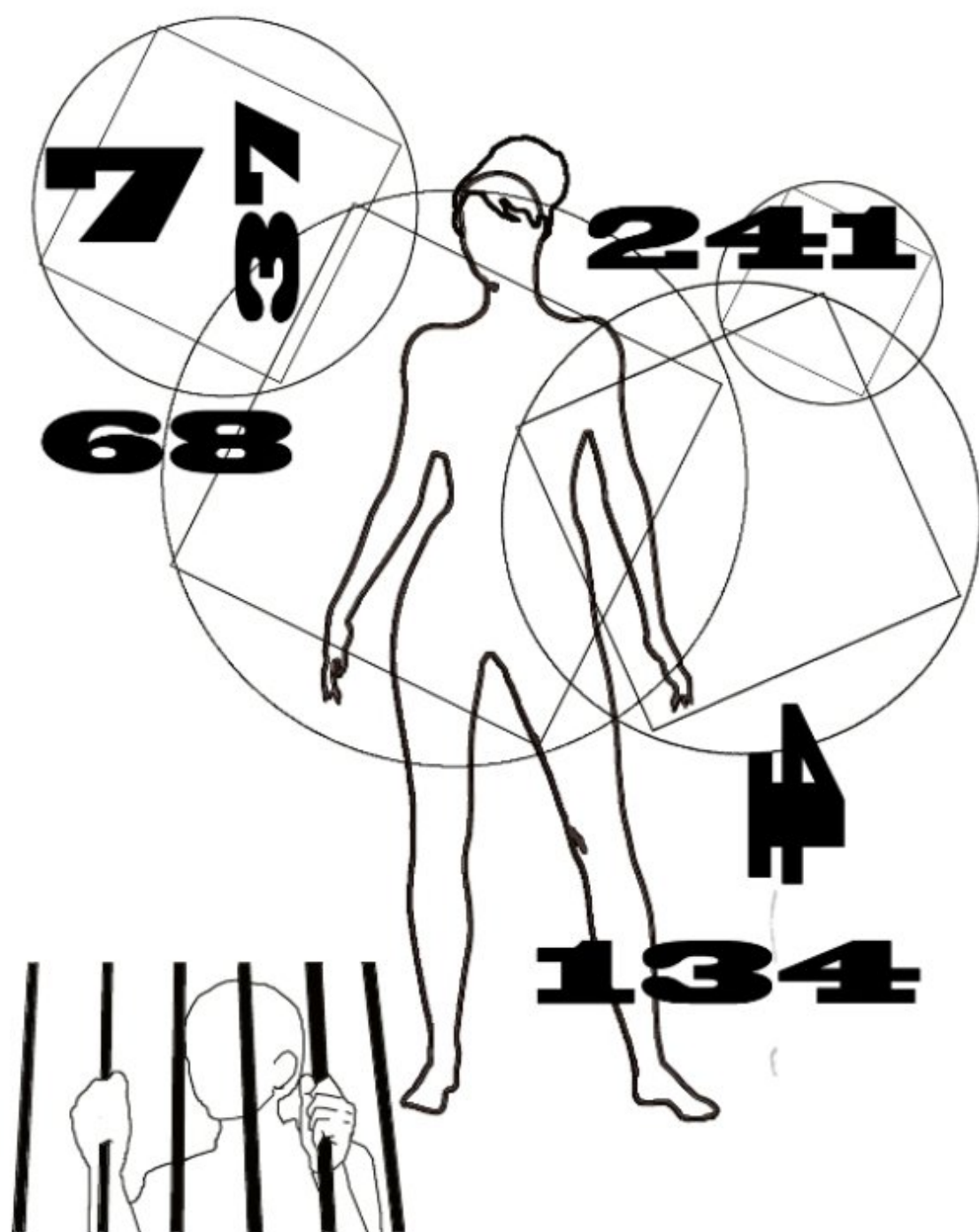
So I walked the two thousand three hundred and forty one steps, crossed the three roads, navigating the six kerbs and finally arrived at my home.

I went down the sixteen steps to the cellar and walked the seventeen paces to where my brother languished behind the bars of his cage.

I confirmed for myself again, yes, I am my brother’s keeper.

If the preacher touches on that topic again, I will tell him just how I fit into that category.

I am sure he will be impressed.



DISCHORDANT

Sandra Davies

Not loudly said but always known: in hungry times, when fish and corn and meat are scarce, new-borns are let to die, more so girl babies than the males.

Not widely known, and said to me but once by my then-mourning father, my survival tributed my mother, his first and favoured woman. She died birthing what would have been his second son. Similarly a second woman within the year but this third is stronger, sweeter-natured and has two moons to go. Yet Yarl speaks less to her than me, watches more anxiously my brother, and consults most frequently the son my mother bore to a grey-haired man of lower rank ere Yarl came to this place.

* * *

I'd fifteen darkest celebration times and never bled, but my rank, if such it could be said, was high for the holding in my head of family names and happenings, and what important and what known by my mother's kin.

The reason Yarl first wanted her.

He lacked land until he crossed the wild white-grey water to come here. Until he and the men he brought forcibly took ours so that no full-grown man from here survived and all children hence were sired by his people men but of the bodies of the women of the land.

His own ancestral kin unknown, and wanting ancestry, past story, wanting patterns, lines and linkage, he knew by having children to the women of this land, he would make their history his.

He wanted sons but unlike the born-men here did not deny life to his daughters, and for that she did forgive him.

His second daughter, she my sister, had bled young and been taken by a man same age as Yarl, who'd crossed the water with him. He'd set himself among the kin of the tribe whose totem was the pale-flesh fish and promised care – Yarl thought of future breedings – but she grew fish-bone thin e'en as she swelled with child, her eyes grey-smudged, not looking.

Near her time I went across; although I'd never birthed I'd helped before. Her man was as a bull, brute strength and big so that although I'd

lain with men before he did me damage, as did the boy child to my sister.

He, with care, survived but she willed she should not.

Words came to me to blacken him, which I'd never done before but I heard my mother speak to me, and saw his fear ere he angry looked away.

Yarl questioned me on my return; said by rights I should have left her body there, but his eyes did recognise my need to naysay her place with him.

Three nights passed and when the moon was full round I went to sit with her. Her body lay no more on the rock where we had laid her, but was torn, pulled apart and broken.

By man, not animal or violence from the air.

A footstep, and Sird my half-brother – squat solid rock where Yarl is slender standing stone – growled softly beside me.

“You saw? You know?”

“Him.” He spat. ‘Know, did not see, but know. Not fit to live.’ He mimed a violent action, hefting a piece of rock.

“He’s the chief man there. Must not let his blood, not so it is known.”

I was fearful. It had not been said but Yarl’s true son was body-weak, Yarl needed Sird, could not afford to have harm come to him and not all would think it good to have him kill their leader man, not when he was lusty strong.

“Without blood? It can be done.”

He said it first, though sideways, “They say she knew of other things than kin.”

“She did, and some she passed to me.”

“The herbs? The berries and the plants? She taught you healing, yes?”

Sird sounded like he knew.

I muttered “And also un-healing.”

He was silent, and I let him, knowing that they – poisons and particular words – would be a safer answer than a dark night rock against the skull.

He asked ‘But how to get close to him?’ then his head answered his own question, because he knew how, as I did, though it made me deep dark cold inside to think of it.

“No!” he said.

“I’ll make him suffer more, before he dies, as he made her ... the hurt will echo the harm, twice or maybe thrice again. I’ll be glad to, and can think of no other way to get to ... the parts I need to.”

* * *

The man we spoke of, Kolf, was waiting at the fire when I returned. Sitting with Yarl whose mouth told him apology for me, while his body barely hid mislike for harm done to his daughter.

After Yarl told me he could not be beholden.

“By taking her body you have harmed his standing. He knows you are not like for like but demands you go to care for the child.”

Yarl saw in my eyes his words did not recommend him and spoke softer. “The child is of our blood and needs care. He will not let him come to us. His other women might do harm. You must go.”

I had no choice. but needed time. “Two days.”

“Tomorrow. With him. I shall tell him you’re not for the taking.”

“He will not hear.” He understood, in part, but did not want to know, did not know all, in any case.

* * *

I had not expected it but Sird waited when I slid out again. He knew some of what I needed and by dawn we had most but not all.

“I’ll bring in three, four sun rises. Until then rely on words.”

Dutiful, I left. While Yarl insisted I return before the midway festival, at which I told of past happenings, I doubted Kolf would allow it.

After two days I doubted I’d survive e’en ‘til Sird came, so hard and bestial did Kolf bestride and ride me.

Had I not the child to care for I’d not have waited for a way to hide the deed.

Sird had learnt the truth, more likely from a woman than the western wind he claimed and had come with slivers of long bone as well as herbs. “I’ve a drink to give him. Will tell him sent by Yarl ... it will first stiffen him ...”

Distressed: I was stretched and raw. “And he’ll force him into me again ...”

“But then will be too heated to know until too late you've boned his blood-boned prick and pricked his arse to bleeding, but be sure he'll know it ere the poison scalds his brain.”

* * *

Much as it shamed me, Sird stayed close and heard and saw the manner in which Kolf exposed me. But soon as I was spread Sird came behind, skewer bones black dripping and Kolf already arse in air. Was quickly done and silently, long bones removed and those of eagles scattered so all believed his breaking of my sister's body much angered ancestors. To make amend for what they knew he'd done to me his women said to take my sister's child which I knew was so as not to take the place of those yet to be born but was glad to do.

The day calm and Sird come by sea so I could lay instead of walk and come more easy home. Yarl's mouth spoke not of death of Kolf, eyes said he gave me no blame and sent women to find herbs and tried to heal but I never lay with man again.

COOTER

Ken Goldman

Dogs do speak, but only to those who know how to listen.

– Orhan Pamuk, *My Name is Red*

Dogs are better than human beings because they know but do not tell.

– Emily Dickenson

George Storm had to shake his head whenever he spoke of his loyal companion of nearly ten years. Those who offered him the dubious condolences of “He was only a dog” or “You can get another” risked serious consequences. The tacky *best friend* cliché proved inaccurate. His Labrador was family with fur.

That certainly would have explained George’s decision.

Dog persons who had spent one minute in the same room with Cooter would have agreed; probably non-dog persons too. George and Rachel’s affectionate White Labrador Retriever seemed the tail wagging embodiment of unadulterated love. Loyal and protective, he was the proverbial dog in a million, not merely a good dog but the best. That would not have been an understatement during those eight childless years Cooter had spent with George and Rachel Storm.

But then came Derek.

* * *

...and on that date Cooter had performed the requisite canine three spins before he lay in his favorite morning sleeping spot, the area at the foot of the stairs where a thick beam of late spring sunlight shone. Of course, as he napped the Labrador had no way of knowing this was a very special day. But the instincts particular to his species told him something felt different. The woman had been gone for a couple of nights and this morning the man again had left before the sun showed. Both had acted peculiar for a while now -- not always in a bad way, but the Lab sensed the two shared an increasing anxiousness that began during the colder days when his sunbeam went missing.

The house itself had taken on some changes. The room at the top of the stairs seemed fuller and within it an odd box-like object appeared that Cooter had not seen before. He gave it a perfunctory sniff. The shape resembled some kind of enclosure, large and with bars, but it did not seem intended for him. Unfamiliar objects hung from that room's ceiling too and occasionally they made a gentle musical sound that was not unpleasant but that he didn't much like.

And during this time there was something growing inside the woman. Cooter often sniffed her stomach and decided he didn't much like that smell either.

But these were not really troubling thoughts. Cooter's foremost concern remained the anticipation of his man and woman's return together and his finding another squirrel to chase sometime soon. During these warm days he enjoyed the occasional run along the open grounds near the water where others like himself would join him as he ran. Today the Labrador's mind remained uncluttered. With the sun's soothing warmth on his fur, sleep came easy, and all was right with Cooter's world.

* * *

The first part of Dr. Hennessey's good news came near summer's end. It took a while and a lot of the old slam bang, but Rachel Storm finally had become pregnant. George's immediate reaction to his wife's news had been an unpoetic "*Hot damn!*" that still managed to bring tears to Rachel's eyes. George grabbed a Beyoncé CD and danced with the expectant mother around their living room and, when Cooter approached, George grabbed his front legs and danced with him too.

During mid-September the Storms received the second instalment of Dr. Hennessey's news, although this part came as a shock. Rachel's ultrasound revealed she was carrying twins. This meant some serious belt tightening ahead, but the new budget could wait. That evening George sprang for a ridiculously expensive celebratory dinner at Le Bon Fin followed by one incredible night of love making worthy of good porn. Rachel topped off their mattress aerobics with "Now I guess I have to tell you who the second father is." There were laughs all around over that one.

The good news and laughter didn't last long.

During mid autumn, following another routine ultrasound, Solomon Hennessey called the couple into his office to inform them of the event he called fetal resorption. It seemed a scary term and Rachel later discovered the phenomenon had been known by a much less agreeable name: the vanishing twin syndrome. Hennessey described how sometimes one twin could absorb the other in utero. Rachel's dead fetus had been compressed and then assimilated into its more healthy sibling. Essentially, in the prenatal equivalent of Cain and Abel, one twin had made a meal of the other.

While respectfully sympathetic about the tragedy, Hennessey was also upfront with the couple.

"It appears the placenta was poorly implanted, but luckily the absorption occurred during the first trimester. Otherwise we would be looking at the remaining infant's major organ failure, not to mention a difficult and dangerous pregnancy. The surviving twin appears strong and healthy and there should be no further danger to mother or child." The doctor took Rachel's hand and squeezed, but his attempt at encouragement did not stop her from crying all night in George's arms.

Through the entire ordeal Cooter did not leave the woman's side for a moment, often resting his head on her lap and during those times when she cried alone the Labrador whimpered along with her.

On the spring day the Storms brought home baby Derek, Cooter had waited several hours for his walk, somehow managing to keep his full bladder in check. Following a quick trip to the nearest tree, the Lab paid the infant his proper attention. He sniffed at the blue blanketed bundle that the young mother held close to her heart and tried climbing Rachel's lap for a more thorough exploratory sniff. He snorted as if he didn't like the smell, but kept sniffing.

"No, Cooter, no. You can't do that." Rachel gently pushed the dog's snout from the child. "He's just a baby and you have to be careful around him. Okay?"

Young Derek didn't appear frightened of the large animal coming at him. The infant even reached for the dog, but already the Lab had retreated.

George called his dog to him, but he didn't come. "You're in the dog house for now, pal. Suck it up."

Cooter whined a little. He didn't often get shooed away by the woman, but Rachel knew their dog understood what "No" meant. He

wandered over to her and, seated at her feet, he managed a feeble tail wag while awaiting the familiar pat. But while Rachel's arms remained full she didn't touch him. The whining hadn't worked, so Cooter gave it up and sat by George.

He stroked his panting Labrador. "You'll have to share some of our attention from now on, pal. Think of Derek as your new baby brother." For an awkward moment, reminded of Derek's real sibling, the couple fell silent. Weeks earlier they had agreed never to mention that awful 'vanishing twin' event again and neither of them mentioned it now. That didn't mean they had forgotten.

At least for that first day, Cooter's sniffing nose probe ended. What replaced it caused George to pull his hand from the dog's muzzle. The sound began as a low and almost inaudible rumbling, but both George and Rachel heard it. Baffled, they looked at each other, then stared at their Lab, whose eyes remained beaded on Derek.

Cooter was showing teeth and he was growling.

* * *

The colors -- he noticed them at once. Deep red. Black around the edges. Had Cooter the comprehension to give a name to what he saw, it would have been an aura. But he didn't need to know the term. He understood what it meant.

These colors he saw clearly and they emanated in vibrating waves from the infant the new mother held in her arms. They surrounded him even as he slept wrapped snugly inside the blanket. The Labrador's sight was less than sharp -- except for this. The colors coming from his man and woman he had seen often. But theirs were softer shades, sometimes blue or gold, sometimes rainbow-like, nothing compared to what Cooter watched now. This infant's colors were brighter and more distinct, their temperature hotter near his fur. And something else...

Cooter knew the colors were not good.

The woman had spoken "NO" to him. Cooter remembered that sound as one of the first he had learned and he held back the strong urge to snarl and bark. It was a difficult thing to do and sometimes he had permitted himself briefly to forget the command so he could satisfy the need. But he knew on this day it would be wrong, that this time was a special time, the

infant a special person. Still, he couldn't suppress the need to bare his teeth, nor could he contain the deep rumbling within his throat. His instinct would not allow that.

*His instinct would not allow danger inside this house either, especially not danger brought into it by this strange smelling intruder whose coalescing red/black emanation meant something very bad. Cooter didn't know what the bad was, he didn't know **how** bad the bad was. He knew only that when the time came...*

[No, Cooter, No...]

He knew the time was not now.

* * *

Another day in the park. These were enjoyable moments for Cooter, running and chasing after the round object the man threw -- and the child's presence would not spoil that. For much of the day, it didn't. The activity must have tired the man and his woman. They sat in the shade by the water, with Cooter leashed and the boy held upon the woman's lap.

A squirrel appeared some distance away, near a tall tree behind the couple. Cooter's nose went to the air while his ears perked. Leashed, he couldn't chase it, but watching the small animal dart about on the grass was all right too. The child sensed the squirrel also. Squirming in the woman's arms, he pointed to it, smiled one of his very rare and discomfiting smiles that Cooter had learned to hate.

"Coo--?" the boy said and the man laughed at what seemed no more than an infant's gurgle.

The squirrel stopped, took to its hind legs, sniffing at the sky. Even as it stood frozen, the creature burst into flames. Within moments it smoldered to nothing, only a small pile of ash remaining that quickly blew away. The man and his woman did not see. But Cooter saw. He barked. Loud.

"Cooter, no!" the woman scolded. The Lab could only growl, then whimper a little. The man patted his head, but the image implanted itself in Cooter's brain. The squirrel had completely disappeared except for a small dark spot in the grass.

And again the little one made his awful smile.

* * *

Another day, while Cooter sat on golden sand with the man and woman, a white sea bird fell from the sky. A thin stream of dark smoke trailed behind it as it dropped into the surf and vanished.

Barks from Cooter, more smiles from the little one.

This time the boy seemed to aim the smiles directly at the whimpering Lab.

And this time Cooter's insides felt hot.

* * *

In the park, from the back yard, at the beach...

Small birds and pigeons, more squirrels, some furry creatures Cooter could not recognize...

He didn't bark.

A poof of flame, some smoke, then gone.

Pain from inside him.

Again... and again...

* * *

By year two Derek had grown into one cute tyke, blonde and with the cereal bowl hair cut of a toddling head banger, a handsome kid if you could apply that word to an infant. George and Rachel Storm often did. Still, from the start, the child scored a heap of what-the-fuck points along his way to the terrible twos.

Rachel dismissed much of her child's anomalies with "Babies should come with a set of instructions." Although nothing she saw seemed worth upsetting her husband, this didn't silence the new mother's own demons and their voices grew louder with time.

Derek filled his Pampers in abundance, the color of his diaper loads unlike anything Rachel had read in the journals: baby poo a kind of forest green, sometimes dark blue, or simply black, as if along with his strained carrots the infant had downed a helping of Crayolas. Hennessey offered no answers for this, insisting Rachel had no reason for alarm as long as Derek's health remained good. Still, following a first-hand examination of the

infant's soiled (and multi-colored) diaper, her pediatrician jotted down copious notes.

Following Derek's examinations, George always asked his wife, "So, our child gets a passing grade at the doctor's?" And Rachel answered with her stock phrase and rehearsed smile, "Fine and diaper dandy," thinking she had become as good a liar as her husband. She figured George must have kept his own baby shit inspections to himself too. If there were an elephant in the room, for a long while that elephant wandering the Storm household wore diapers. Eventually the infant's fecal rainbow turned a more acceptable shade, but that curiosity soon was replaced with another.

Derek's molars and incisors sprouted seemingly overnight, months before their due date. For baby teeth they seemed almost freakishly sharp and they proved lethal to most of his toys. Whether rubber or plastic, the toys suffered the same fate, his playthings always finding their way into Derek's mouth, becoming unrecognizable when they came out.

The words Derek attempted seemed unrecognizable too.

"Arrgh... awrghhh..."

His first words weren't words at all. They seemed more like animal growls, sometimes persisting for hours. Again, Hennessey stressed cool headed patience. The toddler's first real utterance took fourteen months to get out, but the word wasn't Mama or Da-da, as George and Rachel had coached. His first intelligible utterance raised both parents' brows.

"Coo-Coo..."

Derek reached out his arms, but Cooter backed away and disappeared to the top of the staircase for the rest of the day, watching but not returning even to bathe in the sunlight. George had to coax him outside for his walk. Derek often entertained himself with "Cooooo-Coooo-Coooo-Coooo..." Keeping his distance during those times, Cooter often refused to eat.

Derek wasn't much of a crier, but he rarely smiled or laughed either. Whenever George tickled his child's belly, there were no giggles of delight, not even a grin. Instead, the boy stared blankly back. "I'm wasting my time, aren't I, sport?" George often asked with a forced laugh, hoping for some reaction. The toddler's expression made him feel that maybe he was wasting Derek's time too. Occasionally, for no reason at all, the boy broke out in wild laughter that continued for almost an hour, then abruptly stopped as if a power cord had been pulled.

“Awrrghhh...” This seemed Derek’s choice of communication over actual speech and Hennessey suggested that perhaps he was simply mimicking Cooter. There were a few tantrums, but not much else. Emotionally, the boy seemed to have flat-lined and his predominant mood was indifference. Rachel had to ask the dreaded question.

“I’ve read about autism, Doctor. Lack of communicative skills, withdrawn, seemingly absent from--”

Hennessey stopped her there. Opting for the wait-and-see approach, he insisted the child’s snarls were probably just a phase. Children mimicked their world and Cooter was a constant presence in Derek’s. During a child’s first two years it was a tricky business to diagnose emotional disorders, blah, blah and blah. Hennessey squeezed Rachel’s hand again. That particular reassurance was beginning to have less than the doctor’s desired effect.

Derek’s animal growls continued through his second year.

* * *

Derek didn’t seem much interested in his toys, tossing most of them from his playpen or destroying them on the spot. When speech finally came, “No!” quickly became another favorite word, spoken without its having been taught. The boy seemed to hate the menagerie of whatever playthings his parents offered, his response always the same.

“No! Play Coo-Coo!”

But he never really played with Cooter and Rachel took the hint. She bought Derek a stuffed dog, a small white Lab replica. At first the toddler seemed delighted. Muttering “Coo-Coo, play!” he held the stuffed toy close and gurgled to it for days. But soon he set to work ripping it apart until the dog’s cotton guts spilled from its belly.

Rachel scolded him, as she had scolded him following Derek’s having chewed up his other toys. The boy grinned back at her, but his wasn’t the adorable smile of a mischievous child. It had the smug look of self-satisfaction, the definite air of “Fuck you very much, Mother.”

Rachel sat sewing up the torn animal when George returned from Cooter’s walk with a question. “Was Cooter off his leash this morning? Did you see this?” He held the dog up by his front legs so Rachel could inspect

his stomach. A jagged red laceration appeared a few inches below his throat, extending almost to his doghood.

Holding the newly stitched toy Lab, Rachel allowed the plaything's replicated wound to sink in for her husband. "He was leashed. Maybe in the bushes he ran across some glass or something." She shrugged and displayed the toy Lab again. "Or maybe our son is into doggy voodoo dolls. You want to phone this one in to Stephen King?"

George shook his head and muttered, "Curiouser and curiouser." He ran a warm towel over Cooter's wound. The dog's scratch wasn't deep enough to be serious and Cooter kept his whining to a minimum. But the image of Derek's toy spilling its innards revealed something disturbing (or disturbed?) in his boy's behavior. Derek never hugged Cooter as other children might show affection to the family dog and he didn't laugh when around him; instead, he pulled the dog's tail, scratched at his fur, but most times he just watched him because Cooter usually refused to come near. The boy didn't seem content unless hurting or destroying something, and that thought cost George many nights' sleep, a troubling sound echoing inside his brain.

"Awwrraagghh..."

The stuffed toy dog survived intact another week before Derek bit off its head, a neat trick using baby teeth. Rachel discovered pieces of cotton stuffing hanging like puffy entrails from inside Derek's mouth and his lips again curled into a self-satisfied grin as if the child had enjoyed chewing on the miniature dog's innards. Seeing no point in further surgery, Rachel tossed the toy into the trash. She bent down to Derek inside his playpen.

"Your next toy is going to be made of iron."

Cooter's stomach wound healed and his own head remained properly intact. But the couple watched their Lab nightly slink far away from the toddler's playpen, occasionally stealing a distrustful look at the child from across the room. Sometimes, when the dog seemed assured Derek had nodded off to sleep, Cooter growled.

Watching this scene regularly play out, George wondered just what Cooter saw in Derek that he disliked so much...

* * *

While the man and woman slept, Cooter seized his opportunity to slink from their bedroom. He figured the child would be sleeping too and he was careful not to awaken him when he entered. It had taken a long while to risk even this much and still he felt unsure this was permissible. Standing in the shadows by the open doorway, Cooter watched the red/black emanations from the boy glowing in the darkness. The colors were much brighter now and more vibrant, as if an angry fire had erupted from the boy's sleeping place and Cooter felt a familiar burning sensation inside his own chest. Forcing himself not to growl, he moved closer.

Asleep, the child made a snarling sound that human ears would have heard as only a feeble snore. But Cooter's ears heard the snarl differently and he knew what it meant. Perhaps the message was intended only for him, he couldn't tell. He knew only what the child was muttering inside that growling noise. He had sensed this almost from the start.

"Awwrraagghh..."

The meaning came to Cooter, but not through words in the manner they were spoken by the man or his woman. This was a feeling, a distinct message delivered directly to his brain.

[COO-COO NOT TELL... COO-COO NOT ABLE NEVER TELL...]

Cooter sniffed the hint of flame before he saw it. It came from the boy's nostrils and the tuft of fire caused a small scorch on the soft object upon which the child slept. He hoped something as tell-tale as this might disclose to the man and woman their boy's true identity. The child was of them, of course, but he was also of something terrible, a force that for some reason had selected them.

The Labrador's comprehension ended there. His mind knew nothing of fiends or demons; it knew nothing of how they came to be, or even why. Still, some deep rooted primitive instinct told Cooter evil was here. He had no word to name this presence although he somehow understood what this child-thing was -- even who it was. The snarling small creature must have wanted him to know, because the child would not be small forever. He would grow as he aged, and then...

[NOT TELL ON DEREK... NOT NEVER TELL ON DEREK...]

The colorful music-making things hanging from above spun as if there were a breeze inside the room. Cooter knew this was impossible with the windows closed, but what seemed impossible no longer mattered. His attention remained on the boy fast asleep.

He saw something he hadn't noticed before, or maybe the child had been careful to hide it. This wasn't something he would look for. But he noticed it now, and it was because the boy slept that it probably showed at all. His tongue was very long and thin and it fell out of his mouth like some living, growing thing, squirming and reshaping itself on the soft object upon which he rested his head. And something else...

In constant motion, the tongue split in two. Both halves seemed to have minds of their own and slithered in opposite directions.

Yes, the child-thing seemed born of the man and his woman. He appeared human and to the beings unable to see the truth, he may have appeared beautiful. But Cooter knew this child creature was not human, not beautiful. The boy's nostrils glowed with fire and his growls were those of an animal, but he was not really an animal either. The boy-thing wanted to play with Cooter, all right, and not in a good way...

["Play Coo-Coo..."]

[...AND COO-COO NEVER TELL...]

Cooter knew all he needed to know. Here was a monster of the worst kind. The man and woman, maybe others, they were in danger. Here slept a deceiver, a harbinger of death and destruction, evil in its most primal form, evil not born into the world, but reborn into it. Cooter watched the boy curled up and so comfortable beneath the warmth of his blanket and he knew what this cunning child-thing was. The boy could not be anything else.

Cooter had no name for it, no way of knowing what to call it, but had he been able to give it a title he would have called it the Devil.

His decision to act came the same moment Derek awoke...

* * *

From the mobile hanging inside Derek's room, the gentle lullaby-and-goodnight melody should have awakened George and Rachel Storm, both light sleepers. It didn't. No smoke alarm roused them either, although enough smoke had accumulated to have set off the detector. George had used the alarm's battery for the mobile's musical cycles, then had forgotten to replace it. In retrospect it was a pretty stupid thing to do and it created the circumstances for a deadly fire.

Cooter's barks changed all that. Rachel shot upright in bed, sniffing the air.

"George, I smell smoke! The baby!!"

Cooter wasn't by their bed. Not a good sign.

It could have been a lot worse. In Derek's room they discovered more smoke than fire, only a small flame working its way from the carpet and along the protective bars to the inside of the crib. But given a few more minutes...

Cooter was on hind legs, ignoring the ignited carpet. He had been trying to climb inside Derek's crib, almost toppling it. George pulled the Lab from the crib and headed for the extinguisher while Rachel grabbed the boy. Cooter kept snarling, seeming more angered than frightened. What had started the flame, neither parent had a clue. Somehow during the combustion's early moments the mobile's cradle song had kicked in. Maybe some rogue spark from a short in the ceiling fixture had set it off, then landed near Derek's crib, but that was a stretch. Once extinguished, the flame's origin begged some questions from George.

"You weren't stealing a cigarette again, were you?" He opened the window wide to rid the room of the smoke. "Christ, Rachel..."

His wife turned indignant. "You know I quit when Derek came. Were you sneaking a joint?"

George couldn't tell whether his wife was being dead serious or a wise ass. This near catastrophe had frayed their nerves and the accusations were flying.

"In our kid's room? Hell no!"

"Well, *something* started this! Jesus, if we hadn't come when we did--" Rachel examined Derek for any signs of injury. He seemed fine, already nodding off again without so much as a whimper. She had expected some genuine waterworks, certainly some coughing, but there was nothing.

George touched his wife's shoulder. "No more blaming, all right? Thank God, everything seems okay."

Rachel set a bead on him. "I don't think so."

The Lab's barks had awakened both quickly enough to avert a disaster, but whether Cooter had been the night's hero or had nearly caused a tragedy opened up one nasty can of worms.

Derek spent the remaining hours in his parents' bed. Holding her child, Rachel turned to her husband. "Hear me out, okay? Cooter would

have been on top of Derek - he was trying to get inside the crib with him. Maybe he *was* trying to protect Derek, but he could have crushed him.”

“That dog never hurt anyone, you know that.”

“He was growling at Derek the whole time you put out the fire, George. You know how he always acts around our child.” Kissing the top of Derek’s head, she couldn’t help but stare at the Lab by their bed. Cooter’s face remained down, his eyes averted from hers. He remained awake, and he was trembling.

“The fur on his stomach is singed, Rachel. I think Cooter was trying to keep the fire off him.”

“Look at him on the floor, George. That’s the same reaction as when he’s had an accident on the carpet. He’s feeling he’s done something bad and maybe he has.” Cooter’s tucked-in tail led to her disquieting concern, the dog’s body language suggesting that here was one guilt ridden canine with something to hide.

“Cooter was scared, that’s all. He could never hurt Derek, or anyone.” This was the only defense George could offer and he knew it wasn’t a good one. Even the most loving pet at times proved unpredictable. There were plenty of stories about loyal canines giving in to some wolf-like instinct, then chewing off their owner’s face.

Rachel kept her eyes on the Lab, still awake on the carpet. Sleep was not an option for anyone tonight. “I love Cooter too, you know I do. But we have Derek’s safety to consider.”

Against an argument of perfect logic, George offered the only response he could.

“Cooter is our dog.”

“And Derek is our son.”

George got out of bed and held his dog close, stroking his head. “Things have been hard for you to understand, haven’t they? You’re a good dog. I know you are.” The Lab must have taken in some smoke and he was breathing heavily. George whispered near his dog’s ear, “You’re family too, Cooter. Don’t you doubt that for a minute.” He looked back at his wife. She was gently rocking their child, but she was watching them.

Except for the day Derek was born, this was the only time Rachel Storm had seen tears in her husband’s eyes.

Cooter's throat felt raw, his insides hot. The smoke still burned in his eyes and inside his chest. This must have been punishment because he had done wrong; he had tried to harm the child, and this was the result. The man and his woman, they didn't know, they couldn't know about the boy, what he could do and what he did. The flame, it started from the child and it was meant for Cooter to see, meant for him to act as he had acted.

["Play, Coo-Coo..."]

The boy had seemed unaffected by the flame, had not been hurt by it.

No, that wasn't correct.

The boy had enjoyed the flame.

The nasty taste inside his mouth reminded Cooter of what he had done and now the woman had become angry with him, the man sad. His instinct knew this without understanding the words they spoke to each other. He understood also that he had been a very bad dog and they would not excuse very bad dog behavior. Even as the man held him and spoke softly, instinct told him this.

Cooter had not slept and when morning came he felt dizzy and ate little. His insides still burned and he felt unwell as he lay alone and quiet on the floor. He would have liked to sit in his spot with the sun on his back, but he knew the child would be near. Not wanting to call attention to his ailment he coughed quietly, hoping the boy didn't hear. Cooter did not want more flame. If he felt poorly, best he not show it and prove himself a bad dog again for the trouble he caused. The voices of the couple were unusually quiet as if he were not meant to hear them, and he feared punishment was coming.

In a short while it came.

* * *

For days Cooter couldn't make it up or down the stairs and his coughing had turned chronic. What he managed to eat didn't stay inside for long. He seemed more tired by the hour, but he was one stoic canine and kept his pain to himself. The veterinarian appointment became inevitable and on the day George carried his Labrador to the car Rachel watched from the window with Derek in her arms. George hoisted his dog high so Cooter

could see the child wave to him. He wondered if the boy understood he was probably waving goodbye and he wondered if Cooter understood that too.

“See how much Derek really loves you?”

Cooter saw.

The vet’s diagnosis wasn’t good, something about pulmonary blistering in the lungs caused by long-term smoke inhalation. The damage was extensive, the doctor’s observation baffling.

“The blistering indicates exposure to smoke irritation over a long period of time. He’s got signs of pulmonary bullae - bacterial blisters in the lungs, very common in Labradors. There’s been coughing and hacking with sputum, am I right? Second hand smoke can do that to any dog after a while.”

“My wife and I don’t smoke. Not anymore. We had a small fire in our house a few days ago.”

The doctor examined the chest x-ray again and shook his head. “He’s an older dog, George. There’s massive scarring to the lungs that’s been going on for some time. Cooter has metastatic tumors, inoperable. It happens, sometimes for no reason. I don’t see how we can...”

George didn’t hear the rest; he didn’t have to. Cooter would not be getting better; the pain would not be going away. He didn’t leave his Labrador’s side as the vet gave the pentobarbital injection, stroking his dog’s head, speaking quietly to him. It was over fast, but George kept speaking to his dog even after he watched Cooter’s eyes close.

“We had a terrible decision to make and you made it for us. You knew, didn’t you?”

Inside the car George saw Cooter’s leash on the seat. He held it for several minutes. And then he knew what he had to do.

He made one more stop before he drove home.

* * *

“You did the right thing,” Rachel later told him. For several minutes the couple silently held each other. George kept his secret decision to himself.

Derek looked around the room, his eyes focused on the area at the foot of the stairs from where the sun had already drifted past - Cooter’s spot. He seemed confused.

“Where Coo-Coo?”

* * *

He had seen the boy in the woman's arms, had seen the child's waving hand. The image disturbed him, but Cooter was outside now and even if he no longer could stand on his legs for more than a moment, the warmth outside always felt good.

He liked traveling in the car. It meant he would spend time sitting in the sun. He knew there would be no running today, but maybe there would be squirrels to watch. He would enjoy that. The man did not speak much. This felt strange because the man always had words for him when it was just them together. But today there was mostly silence inside the car. A long silence.

Cooter realized the man had not brought him to where the water and trees were, not to where the sun was. He knew this place and he remembered he didn't like it. He felt too tired to whimper, even as he lay on his belly upon a cold surface when the man stood alongside him. Another man stood there too, and he was holding something long and pointed. Cooter felt a sharp pain beneath his tail and then more tiredness, a lot more tiredness.

His man stood alone with him now and the silence was over. Touching his head, his man whispered to him and spoke his name. Hearing it felt good.

For only a moment, Cooter saw the image of the child's arm waving. He didn't want that thought in his head, and he pushed it away. Instead Cooter concentrated on his man and the woman and in his thoughts they were not angry or sad because of him.

He thought of his favorite spot in the sunlight.
And for that very brief moment he was there.

* * *

Time helped, but only a little. A month. Two. Occasionally the sting of memory went somewhere else, but it didn't disappear.

George had kept his questionable decision from his wife until he brought Cooter back home and he had expected Rachel to be appalled. Although the taxidermist had done an admirable job, George had no idea

where to place his late pet. The family room was probably out of the question, but Rachel's reaction surprised him. She insisted Cooter be placed there. She even smiled.

"He looks happy again, George. So do you."

George ran his palm along where the singed fur on Cooter's belly had been expertly repaired. He lightly stroked the back of his dog's ear the way Cooter had always enjoyed. Taking Rachel into his arms, he kissed her and whispered "Thank you..."

"Play with Cooter!" Derek shouted from the floor. This was the first time the boy had called the Labrador by his proper name and he managed to get to his feet to reach out for him. George stopped him.

"No, Derek. He's here to stay with us again, but Cooter isn't a toy. You can look at him all you want, maybe pet him a little, but no playing, all right? Cooter is running and having a great time in doggy heaven and he left this part of himself behind for us to remember. But no playing with him. Understood?"

Not happy with that explanation, Derek frowned. A dim memory stirred of a much smaller Cooter toy he hadn't liked much, but this new one was so much better. He pointed towards the restored Labrador, his finger wiggling at him.

"Okay, Daddy."

* * *

Summer passed, then winter. Once, while mother and child were in the park, some old woman had said of Derek, "They grow so fast, don't they?" Rachel smiled because it was true. Derek's growth seemed off the charts.

Spring. Morning...

Rachel was finishing up the breakfast dishes. In the family room George checked his lap top for the weeks' Dow Jones while Derek spread out on the floor watching the TV. Never impressed with the moronic Saturday morning Doodle Bops and Bugaboos kiddie fare, by age three the boy had deep sixed the cartoons and had developed a curious fascination with the news.

"Daddy, look! Press-dent!"

CNN showed the President stepping off Air Force One somewhere in the Middle East, the First Lady at his side. Derek couldn't get enough of

whatever political updates appeared live. He pointed at the screen while the Chief Executive smiled for the cameras. The man's smile disappeared and he grimaced as if in sudden pain. The familiar Presidential grin quickly returned for the world to see; it returned the same moment Derek's finger pointing ceased.

His son's odd cackling caught George's attention. It didn't sound anything like the laughter of a child. For a moment it appeared his boy's tongue looked peculiar as he laughed. Longer, almost snake-like, it darted from his mouth so quickly it seemed to have split in two like some Hollywood special effect. A second look revealed nothing out of the ordinary and George reminded himself that maybe the time had arrived to consider glasses.

In the corner of the family room the late Cooter stood tall. The child was now big enough to wander into the room by himself to stroke the mounted Labrador's sleek fur. The cold sensation felt good and sometime soon, when his parents were not around to watch him, Derek intended to do more than pet him. The thought caused twin sparks to flash inside the boy's nostrils. He was careful to make sure his father didn't notice.

George's attention returned to his lap top, but Derek now saw what no one else could see. The dog's lifeless eyes rolled toward him, and the Labrador's aura burned bright red like a fire. The boy watched as Cooter's mouth opened just enough to show pointy canine teeth. His teeth were still very sharp.

Derek heard growls meant only for his ears. The sound made him grin and he showed teeth also. He knew what those growls meant.

Cooter wanted to play...

A VALENTINE FOR OCTOBER

Ken L. Jones

In an old far away castle falling down
By a pumpkin patch full of ghosts
Each of which had spooky eyes
Upon their orange faces
On that old wrinkled night
When the kids go trick and treating
Full of dozens of Dracula's
And pretty patterns of Frankenstein's monsters
And scarecrows wobbling as they climb down
From the cornfields they protect as they head to town
I marvel at this night that is such a witch's brew
Of cinnamon and apples and crepe paper streamers
And goblin owls who strangely coo
And as all of this creeps in like music that has abruptly stopped
A hot mulled specter floating like a jack-o-lantern
Who was wearing a clown outfit that reeked like a voodoo swamp
Came upon me all rattled-trapped and monochromatic
And warned me in a voice that sounded like television static
That I should be grateful for all of this
And that every time that I experienced
Such October magic that I should realize how lucky I am
That all through my life clear up to now
When I am an enfeebled elderly man
I've loved this season as few others can
And through my poetry, stories and songs
I worked hard to make sure that all of this was better understood
But then none of this has ever been a problem
And this much about all this should never be forgotten
That I am its most natural son
And I've done what I've done
As an act of love and it was the greatest pleasure on my part
For I did it sincerely and from the bottom of my heart
And through it all I have never truly grown old

And was always content since my pockets
Were filled with its autumn gold.

ALL THAT FALLS

Ken L. Jones

Miles Mahler had never wanted to have a job like this but now he did. Several abortive years as a would-be novelist had reduced him to taking a position as a grade school janitor just to put food on the table for his family. There was something more than unsettling about the school that he had been assigned to and it had little to do with the fact that it was the oldest one in the vast school district that had hired him. It had been the first school in all of Anaheim and had been erected in pioneer days and the old school building was still there but had been remodeled back in the fifties to serve as its teacher's lounge. Miles hated the school almost from the beginning because he was expected to do about three times as much work as the other day janitors did at the many schools he had substituted at before he was hired full-time here. The worst part of it was the trees. Real honest to God virgin forests didn't have as many trees as this place did and all of these shed leaves on a year round basis. In addition to all the other chores he was required to do he was also expected to rake up all these leaves and keep the grounds spotless. This proved to be an infinity type proposition and was impossible to accomplish and the old building principle who was dying of lupus wasn't very nice about it. So even though it was against the rules of his union Miles early on figured that he was expected to come out to the school for free on Saturdays for several hours just so he could stay even with the never ending falling leaves.

It was on such a Fall Saturday on a cold brisk day that he first noticed that the school was haunted. While pausing in the middle of raking a giant pile of leaves he heard the familiar sound of several of the ancient classroom doors that were just beyond his eyesight opening and then closing. Suspecting either vandals or thieves he took the heavy rake he held just in case he had to defend himself and hurried back to that part of the school but there was nothing and no one there. Returning to his raking he again experienced this several times and finally gave up on responding to it because it was getting dark and his wife and children were expecting him home for dinner soon.

This and similar things occurred over the next several Saturdays he worked at the school and each time that he was there these anomalies seemed to increase in their complexity and duration. Finally on the tenth trip he actually encountered somebody at what should have been an empty school campus. He was an elderly American Indian man dressed in traditional garb. He had long white braided hair and as Miles stared at him in wonder he noticed that the old fellow's eyes were devoid of sight.

The old man spoke to him in a hoarse broken style of English, "Why you white man on this land? This burial ground for my people. Sacred place."

Miles didn't know how to reply to that and as he studied the old man closer he came to the conclusion that he must be some kind of a medicine man. Perhaps some kind of a sorcerer of great power but before he could speak further with this strange old man he began to shimmer and seemed to evaporate before Miles's eyes like a mirage.

This strange visitation troubled him all through the next work week and on Wednesday when the district painting crew arrived to begin to paint the buildings he told old Ted Tyler who was the lead painter of the crew about what he had seen while he had been plying his extra duties the previous weekend. They were drinking coffee in the back of the giant painting van together when he did this and Ted seemed kind of amused at the whole thing. Normally this reaction would have upset Miles but he liked Tyler who like him was from the state of Iowa and who reminded him of his own recently deceased father and so Miles took it in his stride.

Lighting up a cigarette Tyler began to talk to him as a father would a son, "I'm not a bit amazed to hear this. I've been living in Anaheim since I mustered out of the Navy at the end of World War II and I've been painting this school every year or two every since then so I've heard some things about it. One day years ago I was talking to the elderly grandmother of one of the kids here while she was waiting to pick her granddaughter up and she was telling me that she used to attend this site back when she was a little girl when it was just a one room Little House On The Prairie type of an affair and that strange things went on even back then. I definitely think there is some kind of Indian burial ground around here somewhere because about fifteen years ago a giant sinkhole opened up back near the lunch area and there where all kinds of Indian bones and relics that we found there. I thought for sure some archeologist would want to come and start digging

around there but that wasn't the case. They had us fill it in as fast as we could and then we blacked topped back there over the top of it too. So what you're telling me makes lots of sense. If I was you I'd be careful especially when I was alone on the campus on the weekends."

None of this did anything to weaken the apprehension that Miles felt about the school and as the week went on just being there even when there were several hundred other people with him started to feel wrong and ominous as if something was lurking and waiting to pounce on him. Finally Saturday came again and he almost decided not to go to the school and he wouldn't have if his job wasn't hanging in the balance on account of it. So reluctantly he made his way to the last place on Earth that he wanted to be that day. Ten minutes into the leaf raking the worst amount of high strangeness he had ever experienced on the old campus began. The whole place seemed to be alive and throbbing and he swore that he could hear the sound of moccasined feet hitting the earth as they danced accompanied by the droning prayers of Indians who sounded mournful in their supplications. Finally deciding he could stand it no more he began to return his rake and the trashcan on wheels that he put the leaves in to the custodial shed in the rear of the campus so he could leave when he again was stopped dead in his tracks by the specter of the old shaman.

"Enough! This go no further. Three days all this stop. You good man me think so you no be here then. Stay home with family and be safe."

Too startled by this to say anything very complicated Miles just nodded his head and softly mouthed, "Thank you," then white as a sheet he staggered off to his car and somehow made it home.

Not wanting to upset his wife with whom he had never shared anything about what went on at the school he pretended to have the flu and spent the rest of that day and Sunday in bed trying to forget all that he had seen and experienced.

Monday came and the old principal was livid and said so in the scolding way that a parent sometimes uses to talk to a child and then he told him more firmly than that it better not happen again. This upset the young man almost as much as what was truly bothering him.

Although he tried to ignore the events of the previous weekend he found that was impossible. Now every shadow and creak on the ancient property made him jump a foot and the next day was even worse. He was so visibly shaken that people were noticing and asking him what was wrong

including the old building principle who called him in for a lunch time conference. Not really meaning to Miles inadvertently blurted out what was eating at him and his boss didn't even try to conceal how crazy he thought his new day janitor was. Picking up the phone at his desk the old man called the foreman of janitors and told him to send a substitute the next day after informing him that Miles was having some kind of a personal problem that required him to be off for a while.

The next three hours dragged by like they were made of solid lead and then it was time to go home. Still not wanting to tell his wife the truth about all that had happened Miles instead made up a story about how he had strained his back doing heavy lifting and so he wouldn't be going to work for the next few days. Sleeping in the next morning he almost felt right with the world again until his wife rushed into the room and turned on the local news on a small television that they enjoyed at the foot of their bed. There was a remote news broadcast that originated at the school he worked at on the TV. Everyone on the scene was frantic like they had been on the day of the 911 bombings. As best he could piece it together a massive wind had started early in the morning and about an hour after school started every leaf on every tree in the whole place had been blown off and had covered the entire school somehow. As impossible as it sounded the school was now drowned in leaves, every inch of it had vanished beneath them much like the old town of Pompeii had disappeared beneath the volcanic ash of Mount Vesuvius centuries ago. Even more impossible than that was that nobody could escape from this remarkable mass and no one could gain entry into it either. Even more troubling than that was that no traditional method of rescue seemed to produce the desired results either. Several tractor blades were mangled attempting to do this and even several jackhammers had their bits explode when they were deployed.

Through it all the horrible screams of the trapped children and the school personnel there with them never ceased. It was heart rending to hear them say that they were running out of air as they pleaded with those outside of all of this weirdness to rescue them. This went on for longer than anyone could stand it and then was abruptly replaced by something worse than that, a total and absolute silence. As you might expect the unfolding of all this caught the world's attention and every second of it was broadcast on TV and Miles more than anyone else was riveted to it in his home.

Then two days later after everyone had given up on finding a conventional way of addressing this problem something happened that was even stranger than any of this. A mighty wind came up and tore into the leaves which now seemed to be nothing more than they should be and so they were carried off into the sky for parts unknown. The news personnel covering this event were speechless at what they beheld because now that they could see it clearly there was not one trace of the large campus that had once been there nor were any of the people who should have been there ever found alive or dead. In its place incredibly was an elaborate Indian burial ground and in the front of it seated with his legs folded was an ancient mummified old Indian shaman who with a shudder Miles recognized immediately as the specter who had warned him to stay home. All of this was too much for the young janitor to bear.

The ancient shaman was right. What was theirs was theirs and no one would ever be able to properly explain all that had so tragically transpired and so he never even bothered to try and from that day on the very sight of falling leaves caused Miles Mahler to turn pale and to shake like he was one of them himself.

SEVENTY NINE SUMMERS

Dene Bebbington

The fishing boat lurched on the waves. In the little wheelhouse, Frank Weaver braced himself against the movement; a fisherman almost since boyhood, he had good sea legs and knew how to cope with choppy seas. He'd be glad to reach the shelter of the harbour and offload their haul of fish. At home, his wife Ruby would be waiting with his favourite meal of cottage pie and a glass of dark ale.

A moment later, he flipped the wheel the wrong way and a wave tossed the boat over into the abyss. He didn't know why he'd done it. Cold sea flooded the wheelhouse and he gagged on the brine.

Frank awoke coughing, his arms flapping frantically. Realisation came slowly that he was actually in bed, not drowning and sinking to the sea floor. His shaking hand reached for the bedside light. For a few minutes he recovered from the nightmare, letting the tightness in his chest subside before turning out the light and tentatively returning to sleep.

Natural light brought him out of slumber a few hours later. It took him longer than usual to get out of bed and get himself washed and dressed, even with assistance of one of the care workers.

The winds of life had slowed to a zephyr for Frank with his age and condition. A worn, workman's hand shook the mug it gripped, sloshing the tea he sipped. Waves in the tea reminded him of last night's dream and the swells he'd endured far out at sea countless times during his working years. And yet, the staff weren't aware that more than just Parkinson's disease caused the trembling hands. Experiences that he hadn't talked about left him shaken, inside and out.

Two years ago he'd been admitted to the Downsvue Care Home. Parkinson's disease, which had come on since the death of his wife Ruby a few years previously, had made looking after himself almost impossible. Eventually his daughter had to insist that he go into a home after a call from the hospital reporting that Frank, unable to steadily pour boiling water from a kettle, had scalded his left hand.

His room at the care home was adorned with a few personal touches. A faded wedding picture of his younger self with an ordinary looking woman, a picture of his daughter and her children and a handful of boat

magazines in an untidy pile sat atop a chest of drawers. Having worked as a fisherman for fifty years he still loved boats, even if he hadn't been on one for a long time – except in his dreams.

Soon after moving into the home he'd become friends with Mary, a warm person with a cheeky sense of humour that hadn't faded away over the years. No romance had blossomed; Ruby had been his lifelong love and at his age all he wanted was friends, not even a loving companion. Once a week they'd played cards together; the loser's forfeit would be to buy the winner a small treat, which usually meant Mary receiving chocolates. The staff joked among themselves that while Frank's wallet got slimmer, Mary's waistline got fatter.

Mary had died of heart failure a week ago. The last conversation between Frank and Mary was during dinner on the eve of her death. While eating trout she'd teased Frank about his roast chicken, “You a fisherman all those years and you don't eat fish!” Her Irish brogue never failed to make him smile even when she teased him.

The manager of the home told her family which residents wished to pay their respects. Funerals of aged friends and relatives were becoming too frequent for Frank. In morose moments he used to half-joke to his friends, “There's nowt down for getting old. You're either going to somebody's funeral or they're getting ready to attend yours.”

He was staring into the half-empty cup of tea when Marlon entered the room to ask, “You ready to go in five minutes, Frank?”

“Come again?” Frank replied, tilting his head like so many of the partially deaf residents.

“Are you ready to go in five minutes?” Marlon repeated, this time a little louder.

“Aye, I think so. Have to pay my last respects to Mary. It wouldn't be right not to,” Frank responded in a subdued tone.

“I've seen seventy-nine summers,” he mumbled as he glanced out of the window to watch a desiccated leaf flutter to the ground.

He shifted in the old chair, the brown leather faded and cracked where it had supported old bodies uncountable times. He wished he had some whisky to steady the mind tremors building up to a headache.

“Give me a hand getting up, will you?” Frank said.

Marlon helped him to his feet and handed him a walking stick.

This young man was one of the few staff who connected with Frank at a personal level. As a kid he'd loved to go in rowing boats at the local boating lake. Now he wished that he could afford a small sailboat, but it was a pie in the sky idea on his lean wages. Whereas most of the other staff would block out thoughts of what it's like to be old and frail, Marlon thought about it rather too much for a man in his late twenties.

He helped the old man into a car. Frank sat with the stick balanced between his legs and during the journey his hands shook more than usual. Marlon noticed and asked if he'd taken his medicine. He had. Frank was one of the few residents who could be trusted to take their own medication and not forget to do so – at least until the Parkinson's progressed too far.

They rolled up by the bland modern crematorium building that almost taunted: death is a banal civic business. Anxiety showed in Frank's starey eyes; he already felt a chill before stepping out of the warm car into the bracing autumnal air.

Mary's daughter greeted the people who filed into the building.

"I'm so sorry about your mother. Mary was a lovely woman and I'll miss her," Frank said while holding her hand in his.

After expressing their condolences, the two men sat on a row of seats near the back of the crematorium. Prayers and hymns barely soothed Frank. One day he hoped that belief would be repaid, that he'd be reunited with his beloved Ruby and their departed friends. Marlon handed him a tissue to soak away the tears. Tremors in Frank's hands intensified as the service progressed; it was as though he was trying to bounce an invisible ball. Sobs emanated from various parts of the room when the casket slid behind a screen ready for incineration.

Frank squeezed Marlon's arm and said, "Do you see that weird figure?"

"What figure?" Marlon replied.

Frank raised his voice, "There! The one grinning." He pointed to where the casket had lain during the service. A hunched figure in a black smock that billowed, despite there being no wind inside the building; its smooth white doll-like face grinned – the kind of grin when someone has been mischievous. Drawn cheeks and sunken black eyes added to the fiendish visage.

Mourners turned around to see who was making a fuss. Marlon shushed Frank, whose face had turned ashen. Frank closed his eyes for a

few seconds, then opened them; the figure had disappeared. Anguish soon returned to replace a fleeting sense of relief.

Marlon insisted they return to the care home without going to the wake which Mary's daughter had invited them to. He didn't have to try hard to persuade Frank. To make the old man feel less embarrassed he asked, "Can you describe what you saw?" and did his best to listen impassively.

* * *

Two days later Frank was eating breakfast alone – the dining room was half-full by the time he arrived. Like a shy child he'd chosen a seat away from the others. Today, he decided, would be the day to apologise to Marlon. They hadn't seen much of each other since the funeral due to a change in the staff rota.

"Sorry about that the other day," Frank said when Marlon entered the room and came over to say hello.

"About what?"

"Tha' knows, at Mary's funeral service when I saw that bizarre thing and got meself worked up."

"I think you're mixed up, Mate. Maybe you're thinking of a funeral some time back. I ain't taken you to one since Harry died last year."

"Are you putting me on? I know you're young, but you shouldn't wind me up like this," Frank said indignantly, aware that Marlon could be cheeky but wasn't normally cruel with his jokes.

Marlon put an arm around Frank's shoulder to add reassurance to his words. "Frank, I'm not winding you up about anything. I think your memory's playing tricks and you're having a senior moment. There's been no resident here called Mary for at least a year."

"But there was, and we were good friends. She was in room 15," Frank said. He banged the flimsy table with his fists so that cups rattled in their saucers. "Why don't you believe me?!"

A couple of seats away Isabelle tutted and steadied her teacup.

"Isabelle," he shouted. "You remember Mary, don't you?"

Isabelle wasn't the best person to ask. She shook her head.

The staff at the home were used to dealing with confused residents whose dementia tangled their memories. But Marlon was concerned. He

knew it wasn't like Frank to suffer more than the usual memory lapses of the elderly or Parkinson's sufferers.

"Help me back to my room," Frank demanded. "I'm not senile yet. I know you took me to Mary's funeral."

For the rest of the day Frank mithered himself about why nobody believed him and why they refused to acknowledge Mary's existence. An afternoon kip in his armchair brought no escape from the torment. He'd dreamt of being in the care home's lounge. Instead of other residents, the room was occupied by several of the uncanny figures, their inhuman faces grinning. In a quavering voice he asked who they were.

"They're your friends. Who else would they be?" Isabelle replied, smirking.

Before dinner Frank received good news: his daughter would visit that evening.

* * *

"Hi, Dad. What's all this stuff about you getting confused?" Denise asked. Her normally cheery face wore a frown tonight – rarely did someone from the care home phone and ask her to visit at short notice.

"I don't know, dear," he replied. Her dad had always been down to earth and not one for showing emotion often. Denise had only seen him cry a couple of times; one of those being at her mother's funeral. She could detect fear and frustration in his voice.

He gripped the chair arms to control the shaking in his hands. "They say Mary never existed, but they took me to pay my respects. I'm sure I've mentioned her to you before."

"No, Dad. You never mentioned someone called Mary. Maybe you're thinking of Margaret, you told me about her last month."

Over the next hour Denise listened to her dad recount the funeral incident. She managed to convince him that his mind was just playing tricks and promised to visit again in a few days. With two young children to look after as a single mum she was torn; she didn't like bringing them to the care home, but she couldn't always arrange a babysitter at short notice.

She bent down and kissed his forehead. "Don't worry, Dad," she said in her most soothing voice.

Prior to leaving she met with Tony, the manager, in his office. They both knew that severe dementia didn't come on suddenly. Tony agreed to take Frank to hospital if his confusion persisted.

Life settled back to normal in the subsequent days. Frank went along to the bowling club the following week, hoping to put the funeral episode behind him. He'd been a regular member for a year and though the effects of Parkinson's meant that he couldn't play well, or for long, it was a sedate pastime that he enjoyed. The bowling green gave him a welcome change of scene to the inside of the care home and a chance to catch up with old friends.

When he looked up from bowling his second ball, which wobbled its way to the jack, the grinning figure had returned. It stood at the far corner of the green; Frank pursed his lips and turned away. Whatever the ungodly figure was, he tried to reject it. He looked back to see nothing where it had stood seconds ago. Too much! He carried on playing, but he lost every game because he couldn't focus. Each time he bent over to bowl he'd nervously scan the green's periphery.

That evening he went to bed early, mentally and physically shattered after the bowling.

A member of staff found Frank in bed, unresponsive and inanimate, in the morning.

* * *

Marlon represented the care home at the funeral; out of all the care workers he'd been the closest to Frank. Despite the generation gap he'd respected the old fella. He loved to hear tales of fishing in appalling weather and the time when the fishing boat nearly sank. In some ways Frank was the dad he'd never had – his father left the family when he was a boy of six. Most of the care staff treated the residents reasonably enough, but they didn't see them as people who may have lived an interesting life. They didn't bother to consider that the residents hadn't always been old and forgetful.

Discreetly, on the back row in the church, Marlon only half-listened to the service. Afterwards, a figure dressed in black just as Frank had described appeared when the coffin was interred in the graveyard. This time the stooped thing grinned at *him*. He gasped; a cold ripple ran through his tautening body. Nobody else seemed to notice the harbinger.

Marlon stopped at a pub on the way back, too shaken to return directly to work. In between swigs of lager he mulled over what Frank had said about attending the funeral of someone called Mary. Was *his* mind playing tricks too, or had something inexplicable happened to Frank? He didn't like either alternative. Only the need to drive and return to work stopped him from downing more booze. His mind had already turned numb, anyway. Like moving a radio dial into the gap between stations, the sound of conversations and a TV were easily tuned out to become white noise. In peripheral vision he thought the harbinger had followed him here, but turning his head revealed it to be merely a trick of vision.

Once back at the care home Marlon's boss called him into the office.

"Where the hell have you been for the last few hours?" Tony asked, tapping his watch.

"What d'you mean? You know I went to Frank's funeral."

"Frank who?"

"Frank Weaver, who else? You told me I was the best person to represent the home," Marlon replied with more than a hint of irritation himself, wondering why he had to state the obvious.

"Are you losing your mind like the bloody seniles in this place? There's no Frank Weaver here," Tony said, shaking his head.

"Come on, stop taking the piss. You know, Frank with Parkinson's in room 12."

They looked at each other askance. Marlon was one of the most reliable employees they had. Tony's anger softened to concern. When you're not paying much above the minimum wage it's difficult to get decent staff and Marlon was a welcome change to the kind of half-wits who usually applied for a job. One day he'd probably make assistant manager. If Marlon was making up an excuse to skive off work he wouldn't invent an excuse as daft as a non-existent resident. He wasn't stupid; even the most dim-witted of their staff weren't anywhere near that dopey. Though some came close, Tony mused.

Marlon rushed to the staircase and strode up to the first floor. He pounded along the corridor till he reached the door to room 12 which hung ajar. He pushed it open to find an empty room waiting for an occupant. Tony, puffing with exertion, caught up with him and saw shock in his employee's face.

“Marlon,” he said, “room 12 has been empty for months. You know we've not been at full occupancy this year.”

This was too much for Marlon to take in; reality splintered as if from a hammer blow. He pushed past Tony and, ignoring his imprecations, left the building and got into his car. He didn't know where to go, the only thing that mattered was to get away from the care home – far away and fast.

A pedestrian crossing the road swore as Marlon's car raced by, barely a foot from him. If the man had started across one second earlier he'd have become a hit-and-run victim. Not even running a person down was going to stop Marlon after what he'd experienced that day. For him the world had become little more than a tunnel, and by gunning the car he meant to keep on going until... until his rational mind kicked in again. If it ever did.

He didn't see the red traffic light at an intersection. Fear of mental instability, or of something more sinister, had driven his rational mind aside. A primitive part of his brain was in charge now – fear firmly in the driving seat. A lorry driving across Marlon's route rammed his car. The lorry driver had no time to stop or even hit the brake before the collision. For several seconds the car skittered along sideways, the driver's side crushed by the impact.

The pedestrian who Marlon had nearly killed seconds earlier saw the crash and called the emergency services. He was determined to tell the police that the car driver had been a reckless idiot.

When the emergency services arrived they soon realised that they only had a clean-up job to do. Marlon's right side had been crushed, his head and hips pummelled by the impact; one hand still clung tightly to the steering wheel despite the violence of the crash. It took only a few minutes for the firemen to slice off the roof from the rest of the car using a hydraulic cutting tool. One of the firemen who lifted the roof away to access the driver's body noticed a strange grinning figure on the nearby pavement. Too busy to look closely, he carried on with his work and assumed it was a gawking pedestrian who happened to be in fancy dress.

The figure had gone when he looked that way again.

TRAPPED IN THE SPACE BETWEEN SECONDS

Kevin L. Jones

As he sat bathed in the soft blue light of his computer monitor Richard read the email over again for the tenth time.

We are sorry to inform you but we will not be including your submission in our anthology. Best of Luck getting it placed elsewhere.

Richard reached over and shut down his computer. He wished that he could push a button and shut himself down permanently. He sat rocking back and forth at his desk in the newly darkened bedroom of his shabby one bedroom apartment. He thought maybe he should try his hand at something else besides horror fiction but he soon disregarded this idea. Horror was what he knew and horror was what he loved. Every since he had been a small child he had been obsessed with the topic and he knew that no matter what he always would be. Richard let out a frustrated sigh. With every rejection letter his dreams of becoming the next Stephen King became a little more remote. At this point he would even settle for obtaining posthumous literary fame much as H.P. Lovecraft had but even that seemed unlikely given the fact that very few of his stories had ever seen print. Perhaps his ex-girlfriend had been right maybe this whole writing thing was just a colossal waste of his time. He rubbed his throbbing temples as he rose from his chair and flopped down in bed. Even though the sun had barely set he felt completely exhausted and soon fell into a fitful slumber.

His eyes slowly opened and he wasn't sure how long he had been asleep. It felt like it could have been ten seconds or ten years. Someone or something had softly whispered to him in his dreams and even though he knew he was completely awake he could still hear a low voice calling to him. He sat bolt upright in his bed and scanned the gloomy interior of his room. He seemed to be quite alone but still the voice beckoned to him. The strange words were not in any language that was familiar to him but he knew deep in the blackest corner of his mind that they had meaning and power.

Then something happened to him that made him doubt his very sanity. The far wall of his room began to throb. He stared in disbelief as something seemed to be trying to push its way through from the other side. He emitted a low moan and shook his head. There was nothing beyond that wall but empty space. He clamped his hands over his ears and firmly shut his eyes

and tried to make himself believe that he was just imagining all of this. That the pressure of his menial day job and the endless toil of his literary endeavors were too much for him to bear but no matter how hard he tried he knew that he was truly experiencing this.

Minutes seemed to stretch into infinity and still he heard the horrible throbbing and scratching sounds like something was trying to enter into this world and then as suddenly as it had started the hideous emanations ceased. He slowly opened his eyes and all was now as it should be. He shuddered glad that this paranormal event was over. This was not the first time he had experienced such things since he had occupied his apartment. He grinned sheepishly maybe there was a good story in all of this. Although he spent a great deal of his free time writing speculative fiction about things that go bump in the night he had never truly believed in the supernatural but lately he had seen many things that were beginning to alter his way of thinking. For a moment he wondered if any of the other tenants in the building were having similar experiences but he did not think that he would ever find out. He did not know any of his neighbors well enough to ask them and did not think that, “Hi, is your apartment haunted,” was a very good introductory conversation.

Richard suddenly felt an overwhelming desire to have a drink something he found himself indulging in more and more lately but there was not a single solitary drop of alcohol left in his apartment. He glanced over at the small digital clock that sat a few feet away on the nightstand. It read ten o’clock. Normally he would not have gone out on a work night so late but the idea of being cooped up in his room was intolerable to him. He rose and quickly dressed and rushed out the door.

As soon as he stepped out of his building onto the rain slick sidewalk he let out a sigh of relief it was like a great weight had been lifted from his shoulders. He breathed in the cool night air glad to be away from the oppressive atmosphere of his apartment. He began to walk down the street to a rundown old dive bar that he frequented. He soon reached his destination and when he stepped in to the tavern’s gloomy interior he saw that it was virtually deserted. He was kind of relieved. He did not really crave social interaction he just did not want to be alone. He sat down at his usual place at the bar and ordered a whiskey. As he nursed his drink he saw from the corner of his eye that someone now occupied the barstool next to him. Richard stared down at the bar and hoped that they would just go away. He really did

not feel like indulging in inane chitchat with some boring fucker about sports or the weather. As he took another sip he began to smell the fragrant aroma of a woman's perfume. Richard stole a sideways glance at the bar's other occupant.

A lovely voluptuous young woman with long flowing brown hair and piercing green eyes sat next to him. She smiled shyly, "Hi, my name's Becky," as she held out her soft white hand.

Richard grasped it and introduced himself. For a few seconds there was an awkward silence between them.

Then she began to speak once more. "Look Richard I'm having a really shitty day and I don't have a cent to my name. Would you buy me a drink?"

He knew he was probably being conned but he figured that if he poured enough liquor down her throat he might be able to talk her into coming back to his place. After Richard bought several more rounds he was indeed able to accomplish this. By the time they arrived on his doorstep they were both completely soaked by the unrelenting rain. For a moment Richard hesitated he had not really want to bring Becky back here but she had refused to let them go back to her place.

As they entered his apartment Richard began to make up a fire in the living room's small brick fireplace. He tried not to betray his excitement as she stripped off her wet clothes and sat on the couch clad only in her underwear. Finally after what seemed like an eternity of nervous fumbling the fire began to blaze and crackle. He walked towards the couch and even in his drunken condition he began to notice that something was not right. It was the shadows that danced on the far wall. The black outlines seemed to be moving independently from their makers. Although Becky was seated on the couch her shadow stood erect. Richard stood perfectly still but somehow his dark doppelganger rushed to meet her. For a moment the black figures embraced then a long sharp looking object appeared in Richard's shadow's hand. The obsidian blade was thrust over and over again into the inky outline of Becky's stomach.

Richard's eyes went wide in disbelief as several corresponding vicious looking wounds began to appear on Becky's soft white torso. For a moment she just sat there, her mouth opened, a small trickle of blood dribbling down her chin. She began to moan softly at first then her cries grew louder and more desperate. Richard ran to the bathroom, grabbed an

armload of towels and rushed back to the hysterically shrieking young woman. He knelt before her trying to stem her blood loss but it was a losing proposition. There was scarcely an inch of her flesh that had not been laid open by the continuing invisible assault. As Becky's life blood poured out soaking both the couch and the carpet where Richard knelt her frantic screeches grew in intensity. Richard thought his eardrums would burst at any moment then she was suddenly silent as her throat was slit from ear to ear. Arterial spray covered the already soaked Richard in hideous warm crimson liquid.

For a moment all was silent in the room. Richard's ears rang as he struggled desperately to make sense of the horrific events of the last few minutes. His heart pounded so loudly that it took him some time to notice the hideous scratching and clawing sounds that emanated from behind his apartment wall. It was as if a million rats were tunneling their way towards him. A series of cracks began to develop on the wall as bits of plaster came loose and hit the carpet with a light thud. Richard rose to his feet determined to flee from the unknown horror. The blood stained towel that he still clutched in his fist slipped from his grasp as the wall exploded outwards. The crimson stained piece of linen never reached the ground as time first slowed then stopped. Richard stood in the now deathly still living room. He was completely immobile but fully aware of his surroundings. Pieces of plaster, wood and the bloody towel all hung in midair trapped in the space between seconds.

Richard's gaze was fixed on the gaping hole in the wall and as something emerged from the darkness. He prayed to God for the ability to shut his eyes. His prayers went unanswered. God was not here in this terrible place. There was only the hideous thing that had crossed over into our plane of existence. The foul creature seemed to lack any kind of cohesive shape. It consisted of a million shadowy black writhing tentacles that each moved independently of the other. The terrifying visitor from another world constantly changed form as it slithered towards Becky's mutilated corpse. The nightmare thing hovered above the dead girl. The smell of her blood sent it into a frenzy. The twitching black mass vibrated with anticipation at the thought of its next meal. As its terrible appendages wrapped around Becky's still form slowly the loathsome beast began to retreat back from where it had emerged.

As the nightmare creature crossed back through the portal time seemed to run in reverse. The bloody towel that had never quite reached the carpet floor was back in his hand once again. The shattered wall slowly repaired itself until it had returned to its former state. Then the process began to speed up as everything around him began to darken and blur. Richard felt himself being yanked back through time. It was like nothing he had ever experienced previously. He felt weightless and like a he weighed a million tons all at the same time. Like at any moment he could wink out of existence. Then everything around him began to fly apart almost as if the individual atoms that the apartment was comprised of had been scattered to the four winds.

Then there was only darkness. Richard gasped for air. He felt as if he had been submerged beneath freezing black waves for an eternity. He curled up in the darkness shivering and weeping uncontrollably. In his wrecked state it took him hours to realize that he was safe and back in his own bed. He crawled out from under the covers and tried to stand but his legs gave out from under him. He pulled himself out to the living room half expecting to see Becky's corpse, the ruined wall, and the gateway to another world but there was nothing there. Everything was as it should be. He rose unsteadily to his feet and this time was able to keep his footing. He stumbled towards the doorway and clawed at the lock. After what seemed like an eternity of futile effort Richard was finally able to throw open the door and make good his escape.

He fled the building and collapsed on the sidewalk out front. As he lay on the cold concrete he stared up at his apartment's window. For a moment he thought that he had imagined everything that he had lost his mind. Then his eyes focused on something stirring within his apartment. A shadowy black form stared down at him with hate filled glowing eyes. Richard scrambled to his feet and started to run. He ran until his bare feet were cut to bloody ribbons. Richard never went back to his apartment, his job or his life. He spent the remainder of his days on Earth running trying to put as much distance as humanly possible between himself and the horror from another world.



CRY HAVOC

Rebecca R. Kovar

The only man I ever loved was a voice inside my head. For as long as I could remember, he was there whenever things went wrong, his rich timbre soothing and steadying me so I could go on. Which is funny, because I didn't understand a word he said. That's a special kind of crazy. Even as strange as I was – and as much as I had embraced that – I knew better than to tell anyone I heard voices.

The voice held me together through the desperate angst of teenage years when I was too everything – skinny, brainy, quiet, unfashionable, anti-social, weird – to fit in anywhere. When I got to college, I tried to change myself to conform to different groups, but every time, I found myself in the middle of a toxic, catastrophic rift that sometimes resulted in life-long enmity between the factions. Despite finding the fallout somewhat amusing, after the fourth attempt, I figured it had to be me, so I didn't try again.

Eventually, I recognized how crazy it was that I'd held onto an imaginary friend for so long. The man in my head stopped speaking, did not croon to me in dreams. I would always love that voice, because it had helped me learn to love myself, but I didn't need it to keep me safe anymore. I had grown into my body, found my own style, made connections with people who didn't want me to change. I was going to be okay, going to be normal, do normal things; fall in love with a real person.

The universe heard my desires and sent me Jack. Beautiful, funny, sharp-witted Jack. Popular, welcoming, open-minded Jack. He saw the real me, wanted me to hang out with him and his friends, took me to parties where I learned to dance and make small-talk. Jack didn't let people hand me drinks spiked with gods know what and he always took me home when arguments escalated and fists flew. I'm positive someone has attended a party where no one fought, but every time I went to one, it devolved into a brawl.

Jack understood that I was cautious and careful, especially with my body. He did kiss me once, twice, but not a third time. When it came down to it, I couldn't be or do what he wanted. Not even Jack could measure up to the man my twisted psyche had created. Hard as it was to admit, even to myself, I was in love with a ghost and would likely remain so forever.

As if summoned, the voice returned to my dreams, rich, deep, serious. I wanted to see who he was, so I welcomed him back. Words upon words, not one of them could I fathom, the language slippery and odd. He tried frantically to make me understand, coming to me almost every night. Finally he sang, so beautiful it almost hurt and, despite not recognizing a single word, the stories played out before me – tales of love and battle and loss in an eternal cycle. I knew the scent of him, the feel of him, the way his heart beat in desperation and desire. But I could never see him, his voice our only connection.

For months, words came, still in a language that eluded me. Then one night, the meaning burned through: *Tonight, tonight. Yield, sacrifice blood. Release. Tonight, set me free. Tonight, slip the chains. We run.*

I woke with a start, heart racing.

The sound of a body hitting the wall outside my room added to my disorientation. Seconds later, the screaming argument began, as if I'd only just remembered to add sound to the shit show that was a student apartment complex on a Thursday night. Used to be people waited until Friday to get drunk and violent. Lately, it seemed every time I managed to fall asleep, even so much as a nap, someone felt compelled to work out their issues on the body of another person – and not in the happy, sexy way.

Nicole threw a ball at our front door, the resounding thunk temporarily halting the fight. “Don’t make me come out there and hurt you!”

Since Nicole works out her frustrations with the world by doing martial arts with large men unafraid to be hit, her threats carried weight. The combatants wisely moved away from our apartment. I mumbled my thanks for the momentary peace as I stumbled toward the fridge.

Nicole gave me a knowing grin. “You had the dream again.”

I swallowed some questionable orange juice to soothe my raw throat. “Sorry. I don’t mean to disturb your studying.”

“Finished that. I’ve been jacking cars and shooting people for the past hour.” She nodded at the screen, where a videogame was paused mid-carnage. “You only moaned at first. The screaming didn’t start until a couple minutes ago. I just cranked up the volume.”

Damn. I felt the flush suffuse my neck and cheeks.

Nicole snorted. “Oh, Aeron, please tell me you aren’t embarrassed by having sex dreams, especially since they happen so often.”

“Considering I’ve never had sex? Yeah, I am. And they aren’t even really sex dreams. I know it’s about to happen or has happened, but it never actually does.”

“I guess your subconscious figured out that anticipation and memory are the best parts anyway.”

“Pfft. Like I’d know.”

“Stay pure, Snow White,” she chirped, “I got money on you making it to graduation.”

“Smart bet.” I didn’t tell her why. I wouldn’t even admit to a shrink that the only time I’d felt even a glimmer of arousal was when a nameless, faceless man spoke dream words in a language I didn’t know.

“Depends on what you decide to do this weekend. In the woods. With the Jack-wagon.” She wiggled her eyebrows. She hated Jack for reasons she’d never shared, but she didn’t begrudge me his friendship.

“Never going to happen. He gave up on me a long time ago. I’m tagging along to offer support to Alison, who actually has a shot with Jack, not least because she isn’t invisible.” And was willing to put out, but I didn’t need to say what Nicole already knew.

“Also, she has perfect breasts, hair, skin, and... well, everything.”

“Thank you. I needed to be reminded that I’m flat-chested, freckled, skinny and weird.”

“Hey, none of those are bad traits. And weird is totally in the positive column. Now, pack your shit and get out, so I can get back to running hos and capping the competition.”

An hour later, I left her happily cutting people down with automatic weapons. Two hours after that, I wished I’d either stayed home or actually had a gun of my own, so I could shoot the stereo blasting non-stop pop music. And maybe one or two of the people in the oversized van. Too much noise, too many mingled scents, the haze of medical-grade marijuana and a near-constant stream of petty disagreements combined to demonstrate I’d made a terrible mistake. Unfortunately, there was nothing to do but carry on and hope things got better.

* * *

The mountain was alight with fiery foliage, crisp breeze not so strong as to denude the ancient trees. We hiked to a hollow Jack had found once before,

so far off the path that the rangers would be unlikely to find us. I, who had thus far lived inside the law, reveled in the illicit venture, our group seeming closer for our tiny conspiracy.

As soon as tents were pitched and the fire pit cleared out, I volunteered to get some kindling. What I really wanted was a little bit of peace, to hear the normal sounds of the wood and surround myself with organic smells. Some people are afraid of forests. They don't like the patches of darkness or the smell of leaves composting into dirt. Random droplets plinking somewhere out of sight make them jumpy. The scurrying of small creatures and creak of ancient trees combine into the bogeymen of legends. For me, walking in the woods feels like sloughing off a stiff, old coat that never did fit properly. I'm free there, allowed to be exactly and only me. That was why I'd agreed to come along with Alison.

I took my time collecting sticks. The mist of afternoon promised a chilly evening and I didn't think all the city kids knew what they were in for. Despite my four years surrounded by concrete and steel, I remembered what it was like to live in wilderness. Every summer when I was a kid, my dad and I spent a few weeks trundling around the mountains and valleys, living rough. When I lost him, my desire for camping went into a deep hibernation. Alison's invitation to come on this trip had provided me with an excuse to try again and I was already glad. I felt like I belonged in a way I never did in the city.

In all my years camping, I'd never seen a fire light so easily. If I hadn't been there to help build it, I'd have thought the others cheated by adding kerosene or something. Flames leaped like twisted fingers reaching for the evening sky. Alison stayed to tend it, while the rest of us climbed the hill to a clearing where we could get a better look at the night sky.

The fat, white moon hung, perfect and whole on a backdrop of white and yellow stars. In the distance, I could hear the song of a swift stream or small river. Jack handed me a bottle. I took it without thinking, swallowing deeply. *Not beer.* I choked on the ice cold liquid and my hand came away covered with droplets of green. The others laughed, in on the prank.

"Very funny." I spat again, though the taste was not unpleasant. "What the hell was that?"

"Something my mom makes," Madison said. "It's weird, but it works really fast."

So it did. I stumbled, suddenly dizzy as the world went in and out of focus. I turned back toward the camp, or what I thought was the right direction.

Jack took my arm. "I got you, Aeron. I know what a lightweight you are."

I mumbled an apology. He brushed it off.

"Let me take you where we need to go."

Something about his phrasing bothered me, but my moss-covered brain couldn't sort it out. I think I was passed from person to person as we made our way over ground that seemed less friendly than it had earlier. Voices rose and fell, conversation turning to chants in my addled mind.

I fell, the moon filling my vision, something clear at last. Jack stood by my head, Madison near my feet. The others spaced equally on either side, all looking down at me.

"I can't move," I slurred.

"Shhh. It's okay," Jack soothed. "Relax, let go. Everything will work out fine."

I wish I could say I passed out, wish I did not see them place stones in a circle, light candles, clasp bloodied hands. They sang, guttural phrases making my skin crawl. Their leering mouths revealed teeth stained red, or maybe my swimming vision added the feral cast. Incantation complete, they began to cut my clothes off.

"Don't do this." My protest, barely a whisper, was ignored.

A sickly smell filled the circle, unmoved by the rising wind. I struggled, knowing it was futile, needing to at least try to escape.

Yield. The voice held an edge of command. I could not heed it.

Jack loomed over me, still smiling as if he were my friend. "It's okay, Aeron. We only need you to bleed a little. I'll be gentle."

Sacrifice. Even the voice in my head betrayed me.

I began to cry long before the unwanted invasion made me cry out. Torn asunder, pain unmitigated by poisoned drink, my fingers sought Jack's eyes, settled for digging ridges in his neck. He knocked my hands away and belted me in the mouth.

Blood from my split lip mingled with earth and I swear I felt it shift in response. My body sank, ever so slowly, loam and dirt giving way until a me-shaped cradle formed. Broken, my spirit sought to flee and I was willing to let it.

Abide, my love. The chains are loosed. I come.

A howl filled the night, primitive and full of righteous anger no animal could feign. It came unceasing from my mouth, so loud no hand could silence it. Pain receded, burned away, replaced by raw power I could not control. My tormentors stood rooted to the spot, mouths open in surprise. When another howl answered mine, some flinched. Others cowered. Only Jack was able to pull away. He attempted to cover me, but the damage was done.

“What did you try to summon?” I croaked.

Jack shook his head, as if to deny what he’d intended, what he’d done. “It wasn’t supposed to work. There’s no such thing as demons. It was a dare, like hazing. A silly bet I made a long time ago. I’m sorry. You’ll be okay. It was just...”

“No. Not just. Not just at all.” My fingers dug into earth where they could lengthen at ease, nails growing long and thick and sharp. It should have frightened me, but it felt right and good. No popping of bones, no twisting of muscle, just a slow transformation to what I had been when the world was young and my mate ran beside me.

I heard him approach, swift as the wind, terrible as a storm. He was a blur of darkness, all fur, teeth and claws. Blood rained down on me, washing me clean of the languorous liquor. My pulse quickened along with the change, screams of the damned like music in the night.

Jack was left to me. I gave him leave to back away, though he thought that strength his own.

“What the hell? This isn’t real. You can’t be...” His words dissolved into terrified gibberish.

On four feet, I stalked him, keeping perfect distance with his every step, until he turned and ran. With a single leap, I took him down, rolling him over and over, reveling in his shriek when his arm snapped. The smell of marrow was sweet perfume, but I would not taste his foul flesh.

Instead, I changed back into a girl. Everything but my hands. Straddling him, virgin blood running free over his stomach, I punctured the skin of his neck and held him still against the promise of further damage. Then I scored his chest with my claws, ignoring his cries for mercy, until I had a grid of straight lines.

“X goes first, then O.” I cut letters inside the small boxes. “Then X, then O.”

He screeched when I sliced through his nipple.

“Strange how everyone knows you can’t win Tic Tac Toe, but we still teach it to children. I suppose it’s to help them understand patterns and that not everything turns out to be winnable. But I really think it’s so we can help them figure out how to deal with frustration.”

Jack sobbed, begged.

I carved a diagonal line across three Xs. “You obviously didn’t pay attention to that lesson.”

“Stop playing with him.” The voice came from behind me. “We have better things to do on my first night of freedom.”

I didn’t turn to look on him, afraid he wouldn’t be real, that I had merely hallucinated all of this and was still lying in the grass being violated. “Should I kill him?” It was a good thought, a reasonable notion. That ought to have worried me.

“No.” A hand on my shoulder, solid and warm.

I sighed deeply and looked up. He was beautiful - tall, lean, pale and naked in moonlight that revealed a wealth of scars. Blue tattoos wound around his arms in a script I could almost read. His hair was red-gold and wild-curved, his beard close shorn, with intricate patterns made of yet more scars where no hair would grow again. Eyes the color of new moss tilted at the edge. His savage smile gave me welcome. Other parts bore it out. Despite my recent trauma, I was not afraid of his desire.

I rose in a fluid motion. Hands returned to that of a woman, albeit cracked and caked with blood, I reached for only man I’ve ever loved. He kissed me and the world spun until we were at the very center.

“What is your name?” I asked.

He stroked my cheek. “You have forgotten so much. I tried to reach you, but you would not hear me.”

“You spoke a different language in my head.”

“It took me long to master this one. It is harsh and inconsistent.”

“Still don’t know your name.” That didn’t stop me from running my hands over his arms and chest.

“I am your Emrys. You are my Aeron. So it has been from the beginning.”

The sound of leaves rustling, accompanied by an involuntary cry, told us Jack was on the move.

Emrys kissed my forehead. “Go to the water. I will cleanse this place.”

I looked around, then wished I hadn’t. Bodies lay entangled, Madison’s hand still on the ritual knife she’d plunged into Tommy’s chest. Conrad’s fingers remained locked tight on Jenna’s throat, though he was missing part of his own. I’d thought Emrys had killed them all, but it seemed they’d done some of the work on their own, though I didn’t understand why they’d break fellowship and fall on each other.

I didn’t feel bad about the carnage. I felt nothing at all. Drug, trauma and whatever the hell had just followed did not obscure the fact that my lack of reaction was beyond wrong.

My stomach cramped. I stumbled into the woods and threw up. Then I followed the sound of the water until I reached the river’s edge. In my desperation to wash myself clean, the cold hardly registered. I scrubbed at my skin until it was red, splashed water on my face when the tears would not stop. The river washed away the last contents of my stomach, then soothed my bile-roughened throat.

Finally, I lay down in the water and let it close over me, the burden of sorrow and sin sinking me.

Strong hands pulled me up, held me close. “It is done. You are safe now.”

I suddenly remembered Alison. “Are they all dead?”

“Not the innocent. She sleeps with no memory of this night, nor will it ever return. It was the best I could do for her.”

“I can’t go home.”

“No. You have freed me and it matters not that you had no choice. The Hunt will be upon us as soon as the deed is discovered. We must run, fast and far and find those things that will grant us liberty.”

“I don’t understand any of this. You aren’t even supposed to be real!”

He kissed me and the water around us warmed until steam rose. “Is that proof enough?”

“Remind me to express my doubt frequently.” I clung to him – solid, hot, surprisingly calm for a guy who had just come to life and slaughtered a bunch of people.

He carried me from the river. “We must go.”

I looked at my dripping body and then at his. “Not without clothing. We have to go back to the camp.”

“We need to get as far from here as possible, as swiftly as possible.”

“Exactly why you should follow me.”

He took a path that avoided the ritual site and, after I explained my plan, he simply did what I asked. Alison and all her stuff went into the rental van, along with my pack. Everything else was trashed, scattered, or burned. The police would have a hard time figuring out what had happened, especially since Emrys assured me the bodies ‘no longer existed’ and all trace of our presence had been removed from the clearing.

We parked the van in a motel lot. Alison was still asleep. I didn’t know if she deserved the hell she was about to be in, not least from Nicole, who would be livid and hurt and unlikely to let my disappearance go. Alison would be unable to bear witness to the horrible things I had endured and done. She’d have to make her own way – and find her own truth. I didn’t envy her that journey.

I closed the van door as quietly as possible. “She’s in for a rude surprise come morning.”

“She will survive the storm to come, and she will not lead the Hunt to us.”

I shouldered my pack. “You’re going to explain all of this to me, in great detail. But before that, I need to know, what *are* we?”

His green eyes flashed crimson red. “We are the Dogs of War.” He kissed me, long and hard, pouring forth memory and longing and plight. Tangled tongues told tales my heart knew, and I remembered who I am.

The only man I ever loved was made for me, my absolute match. Kept chained and bound, we fought across many lands, many years, always faithful, always true to a Maker who regarded us as mere tools. We were the perfect instruments of strife, dealers of strategically planned death, fomenting discord that erupted into war. Until the Maker slipped up and I slipped away, dodging the Hunt that kept me from returning to set Emrys free.

The curse of my making would not let my spirit leave, so I remained bound to this earth. New bodies, new lives full of memories, hundreds of these did I have, never knowing who or what I am. And all the while, my love suffered in bondage, waiting for me to recall him. Waiting for a ritual to undo our ties to our Maker and let us loose upon the world.

We are the Dogs of War. And our time has come.

DIRGE

Todd Ocvirk

Cy Cooper's eyes snapped open to the screams of his beloved wife Dotty.

He bolted up from the hard, wooden, straight-backed chair, the covers sliding off his creaky seventy-five year-old frame. He glanced to his left and saw Dotty's frail, gaunt silhouette sitting upright. The room was drenched in shadows at this hour, but a hazy, yellowish hue filtered in through the curtains from outside. Dotty sat rigid, both hands gripping the blankets for dear life, her head arched up from her emaciated neck, tilted backwards, mouth agape like a frozen black hole as an unsettling moan escaped from the depths of her throat.

Please, God, not now, Cy thought, not yet... I'm not ready...

He knew you could never be ready for such things. Dotty's condition had rapidly declined over the last month, but she caught some kind of bug a couple days ago and it had been a downward slippery slope since then. All the doctors could offer him was that it was a flu brought on by Dotty's weak immune system. There was not much he could do. The cancer had been more aggressive this time around, the chemo wasn't working, and rather than put the poor woman up in a hospice in the next town (forty-five minutes away) he wanted to take care of her and see her through her last days.

He stumbled to her bedside and tried to wrest her grip from the blankets. She was shaking; her pale face dotted with sweat as fear overcame her. She didn't recognize him at first, but he tried to calm her down and clasped her hand gently. "Dotty?" he whispered, trying to coax her back, "It's me, Cy. It's okay, I'm right here."

Her breathing was shallow, but she slowly stabilized. Her eyes wandered, discombobulated for a moment, finally settling on the disconcerted face of her dear husband, her companion of fifty plus years. Dark circles caused his puppy dog eyes to sag; he looked exhausted, the lack of sleep and stress weighing heavily on him. She settled back into the pillow, finally regaining her bearings.

"What is it, Dotty?"

She gazed at him, feebly reached out and touched his face. "You're here," she managed, "You're here..."

“Yeah, I’m here. Was it another bad dream?”

She swallowed hard. “Yes. It was horrible. I can’t... *they* were everywhere... coming out of the ground... out of the walls...”

“The shadow people?”

She nodded meekly. “They grabbed me, tore at me, clawing and ripping my clothes...”

“Shhh, it’s okay,” he said, kissing her quivering hand, “It was just a dream. It’s over now.”

“It was so real. I could *feel* them, Cy, just like I feel you,” she squeezed his hand, “I could *smell* them. It was the stench of... *rot*. And this time I made out their faces. I recognized my parents... and *your* parents. My best friend Cathy, my Uncle Royce... your brother Tommy...”

As he listened to her rattle off names from their past, he felt a chill go up his spine. *All these people were dead*. As she spoke, he noticed she became more frantic. Not wanting to hear anymore, he reached up and felt her cold, clammy forehead, her cheek, softly running his fingers over her lips. “That’s enough, Dotty, you’re getting worked up again. Just relax, try to forget it.”

“They kept coming... and coming... it was so real...”

“Well, they’re gone now. You’re in bed, in our house. You’re safe, and I’m right here with you.”

Her eyes began to flutter, her energy suddenly plummeting. “They’re coming... can’t stop them...” She trailed off, succumbing to sleep, her lips still mumbling incomprehensibly.

He watched her a moment longer, then quietly began to weep. She’d been having intense nightmares the last few nights, ever since she got sick. She’d describe them in pieces; someone or something chasing her, people in the shadows, stalking and attacking. This was the first time he got detailed faces. It disturbed him, no denying that. Why was she seeing people who were already dead? He had heard about the hallucinations some have before they were about to die. Relatives and friends who had already passed on, but if he remembered correctly, those were usually under friendlier circumstances. He got the impression it was a more welcoming experience. Simply put, this scared the shit out of him. He didn’t want these kinds of horrific visions haunting her before... well, before the inevitable. He wanted her to be at peace.

With a sigh, he hoisted his lanky frame up and headed out the door, brushing past a telescope by the window pointed towards the sky. His body was dead tired, but his mind was racing with a cacophony of thoughts. He wasn't sure if he'd be able to go back to sleep again, especially in that damned wooden chair.

Cy shuffled out into the living room and sat down on the rattan couch, the thin cushions not offering much support. *Still better than that chair*, he thought. He glanced around the room, immersed in shadows, his eyes drifting to the various framed pictures of he and Dotty's life together that were propped up on bookshelves, counters and end tables. They were bittersweet memories. He found himself looking at the pictures a lot lately, even though in years past, he'd walk by them without a thought. It was natural, he supposed, to cling to these memories given Dotty's condition.

He focused on one picture on the mantel of him and Dotty on a beach in Thailand, taken seven or eight years ago on a whirlwind tour through Southeast Asia. He remembered vividly how he and Dotty had dipped their toes in the warm, crystal clear waters of Phuket, enjoying the balmy days and nights. It had been a trip they had planned for years and when they both finally retired, they set out to explore the world. Neither of them had traveled outside of the continental United States at that point and it was an adventure they had waited to share together. They had no children so they had a good chunk of change saved up to do whatever they wanted. He smiled at the memories, closing his eyes for a second, taking himself back to that time as he imagined the feel of Dotty's skin on that beach as he rubbed sunscreen on her back.

He opened his eyes and glanced at another picture of him and Dotty at Machu Picchu. This was a few years after Thailand, after Dotty made it through her first bout of cancer. She had always wanted to visit South America and he was more than happy to oblige. It was a truly spiritual experience and he loved watching the glow that emanated from her as she thrived in that mountainous environment. It was as if they could touch Heaven with their fingertips. They had already planned their next trip, which would've taken place next summer, a cruise through the Mediterranean, but Dotty's illness got in the way. Up until last month, he held out hope that they'd still be able to go, but how quickly things can change –

What the hell was that?

He thought he saw something move just out of the right side of his peripheral vision, like a figure hunched over in the corner near the bookcase, but when he turned, all he saw was the shadows that infested the room. *Nothing there, old man, you're tired and seeing things.* He was sure it was the lack of sleep and the dream Dotty had relayed to him surely didn't help either. He sighed and stared straight ahead at the TV, an old, bulky cathode ray tube unit, none of that fancy flat screen stuff. He felt a chill on his right shoulder, as if someone were approaching him, or watching, from that same corner by the bookcase. He turned, but again there was nothing. He was left with an eerie, uneasy feeling, but he stayed rooted in place on the couch, his body too tired to move. He felt his eyelids begin to droop, heavier and heavier. For a brief second, he thought he saw a shadow move in front of him, but sleep touched him first and pulled him away before he could do anything about it, flooding his fading mind's eye with images of Dotty.

* * *

Cy sat up at the sound of the blaring TV, interrupting his hazy dream as Dotty's face melted away.

What the hell--?

He didn't know how long he had dozed off, but he stared blankly at the faded, colorless images on the screen, which featured some generic sitcom with nameless actors mugging at the camera. The room was bathed in its bluish, artificial hue, giving it a cold, detached ambience.

Did I sit on the remote or something? He looked around, but the remote was on the coffee table, just out of reach. He leaned over, grabbed it and hit the power button, plunging the room once again into darkness and shadow.

"Dotty?" he called, glancing at the hallway, but received no answer. He knew it couldn't have been her. Why would she walk into the living room, turn on the TV and walk out? Surely she'd sit down next to him if she could. But he knew that she couldn't in her condition.

As he rubbed his face and ran his fingers through his thin, stringy gray hair, he thought back to the moving shadows he had seen earlier. *The shadow people.* That was what Dotty talked about in her dreams. *Did the shadow people like watching TV?* If so, they had poor taste in

programming. *Or maybe I was dreaming, too, like Dotty?* The more he thought about it, the more he began to lose track of the sequence of events before he fell asleep and now he was convinced that he had been dreaming all along. And truth be told, the alternative was not something he wanted to entertain. *Shadows don't turn on televisions, Cy, you know better than that. And ghosts...*

He stopped right there. All he knew was that he didn't want to see the things that Dotty saw in her dreams. He decided not to think about it anymore. He was still exhausted, but with his mind reeling, he forced himself to pick up his aching bones off the couch.

In the kitchen, he finished grinding some coffee beans in an old-fashioned manual burr-mill grinder and poured it in the coffee maker along with hot water. He scanned the kitchen and stroked his beard-stubbed face. *Jesus, what a mess.* Dishes caked with days old food were stacked in the sink and around the counter. If Dotty saw the condition of the place, she'd be pissed. *Later,* he kept telling himself.

Dim, smoky light came in through the small curtained window above the sink and when he pulled the curtains back, he let out a gasp. *Shit, I forgot about the comet,* he thought, *my mind's been on so many other things.* There had been a lot of hoopla about this comet; would it smash into earth and kill everyone? Would it change the gravitational pull? Would it cause a pole shift? Frankly, he didn't care. Dotty would leave him soon and once she did, his will would go with her. Actually, it might've already left.

Outside the modest Cooper home, the door to the deck opened and Cy stepped out, wearing a heavy coat, unlaced boots and clutching a cup of coffee. He and Dotty loved it out here in the desert. Being in nature was the way they wanted to retire and they settled on this spot in Arizona because of the history and spiritual connection to the land. They lived on the outskirts of the town of Grenada, which had treated them well over the years. The people were friendly and the cost of living was reasonable, the only things that got on his nerves were the hippies and new agers who frequented the area.

He looked out across his expansive property, primarily flat, rocky terrain with dollops of frondescence and a small creek bed at the base of a slight decline thirty yards away. He noticed how quiet it was. Maybe *eerily quiet* was a better way to describe it; there was not even the buzz of insects.

He took in the dreamlike haze that settled over the landscape, thick enough that he could almost feel its velvety veneer.

His eyes travelled upwards, where the comet was further west across the sky. He couldn't believe what he was seeing. For a moment, he thought he was in Alaska looking at the Northern Lights. The sky was alive. Maybe it was his ailing vision, but it almost looked like it was raining glitter in the wake of the comet's tail. *It's magical, like I'm in Disneyland*, he thought, but instead of soaking it in with child-like wonderment, he was instead reminded of how lonely he was. *Dotty should be here with me. She would love to see this. The perfect moment would be the two of us cuddling here on the deck as we watch the light show together.*

As if to expound on the negativity permeating his thoughts, he began to notice something *different* in the air; something ominous and unnatural. Maybe the doomsday preachers were right. Surely what he was witnessing would have some kind of effect down here on earth. He was too old to be scared by it, but it gave him a chill nonetheless. He sipped his coffee and pulled his jacket tighter to shield him from the cool, crisp night air. He stared at the sky again. *By tomorrow morning, this will all be gone. No point in even looking at it now.*

He sipped his coffee as his eyes drifted towards the ground. There seemed to be something moving, a surging mass of dark orange near the steps that led from the deck to the dirt. He took a few steps forward, squinting in the misty light for a better look...

"What in God's name—?" he muttered to himself. It was a mass of fire ants piling around the steps and crawling onto the deck, almost as if they were retreating from the desert, scurrying over each other in confused clumps. He stumbled back and scanned the deck some more; he hadn't noticed it when he first walked out, but now he could see that ants were crawling all over the place. Just the sight of it made his skin crawl. Now they were crawling up his boots and he began stomping on them, trying to shake them off—

A sorrowful moan suddenly erupted from inside the house. CRASH! The porcelain mug slipped from Cy's hand and shattered on the ground, showering his boots with coffee. The ants were quickly forgotten. *My Dotty...*

He burst through the door, not bothering to take his boots off and raced to the bedroom. Dotty was in the exact same position she was in

earlier; sitting upright, clutching the sheets, head arced upwards, mouth agape. Her eyes rolled back in her head and wandered around as if she were still lost in a dream. He genuflected at her bedside, bracing for the worst, and gently but firmly grabbed her by the shoulders and tried to snap her out of it. Her head lolled to the side and she stared at him with no recognition.

“Dotty! Dotty, wake up!” he yelled to no avail, shaking her more vigorously the less responsive she was. She began to choke as she struggled for breath. “No! Not now, goddamnit!”

Suddenly, her face was awash with fright and she lashed out at Cy, her nails digging into the soft flesh of his cheek. She gasped, a scream caught in her throat as her face began to turn flush. Cy tried to lean in, not really knowing what to do, and ended up attempting some kind of ineffective mouth to mouth resuscitation and CPR, but the closer he inched towards her, the more horrified she became, squirming and slashing violently.

“Dotty, it’s me, Cy! Stop it!” he sobbed, his emotions and frustration getting the best of him. He leaned over her and used all his strength to try and pin her down. Now unable to move, all she could do was stare up at him as she struggled to breathe. He could tell from her eyes that she was somewhere else, her pupils dilated so much as to render them gaping chasms. *What the hell is happening to her?! What do I do?!* Cy panicked but hesitated in his despair. Suddenly, her body tightened up, like every muscle snapping in a powerful spasm, her back arching, lifting her off the bed. He watched in horror as her mouth slowly opened unnaturally wide and froze, her thin lips peeling back against her yellowed teeth as thick, foamy saliva dribbled down her chin. A soft breath slipped out and her eyes glazed over. He could see the life drain from her, even though she remained in that rigid position.

Cy’s face was a mask of shock and disbelief. Several minutes passed before he moved, slowly releasing his grip on Dotty, his hands trembling as he leaned in to confirm his worst fears. “Dotty...?” he muttered, his voice barely a whisper, “Dotty, wake up...” He knew that she wouldn’t, and when he finally accepted it, he fell to the floor and sobbed. *Oh god, her face...*

That final look on her face would scar him. That was not the Dotty he wanted to remember. She always had a genuine smile, even through her two bouts with cancer and her youthful looks made her appear at least ten years younger than she really was. The look in her eyes was always warm and

welcoming. That's the Dotty he wanted to remember. The one in Phuket, the one at Machu Picchu. But instead, that painfully contorted expression of abject terror, caused either by her entrapment in a nightmare she couldn't wake up from, or the knowledge that she was about to die, would be burned into his memory and it was the only thing he would see whenever he closed his eyes.

He didn't know how long he ended up laying there curled up on the ground, but it seemed like hours, although ten to fifteen minutes would probably be more accurate. At some point, he finally stood up, afraid to look at the knotted thing on the bed that was once his precious Dotty. Without looking at her directly, he could see that she was still in the same position. *She's dead, alright*, he thought to himself, stating the obvious. Every time he tried to look at her, he'd wince and turn away. *Christ, I don't know if I can even kiss her goodbye*, he thought, the tears welling up in his eyes. He leaned in, but he realized there was no way to really kiss her on the lips with her mouth like that, so he awkwardly kissed her cheek. He tried to embrace her, but couldn't do so comfortably with her body so stiff, as if it had already entered rigor mortis. He stared down at her, frustrated more than anything else.

With a disgusted sigh, he pulled a thin sheet over her body and watched it settle over her contours and sink into the pocket of her gaping mouth. He stared a moment longer, sobbing, then grabbed the wooden chair and dragged it to the window next to the telescope. He sat down, for once welcoming the hard, cold, unforgiving surface against his creaking frame and pulled back the curtains. He wiped his eyes and took a deep breath, wishing that it would be the last breath he'd take himself. He noticed ants crowded around the bottom corners of the window outside, a few stragglers making their way across the glass. *Whatever bad dreams Dotty was having*, he thought, *it can't be worse than what's happening here right now*. Or maybe it could, but he didn't want to think about that. He didn't want to think about anything. He leaned back, settled in and gazed out at the sky as the comet pushed farther west towards the horizon. *Goddamn you*, he thought, unable to shake the notion it was that no good comet that brought this nightmare upon him.

A low rumbling rattled the windows, jolting Cy up from his sleep and sending him tumbling from the wooden chair. He was disoriented for a moment as he wiped the remnants of a half-remembered dream from his

eyes, one that involved Dotty watching over him. It had brought him a sense of peace, but now he groaned as he sat up, the heavy rumbles rolling across the sky above his house. *Is that thunder? Are we under attack?* He leaned on the chair as he stood up, scowling as he noticed a few ants running crazily up his legs and arms. Glancing down, he noticed a throng of ants crawling over each other, darting every which way.

“Goddamnit!” he yelled, stomping on some of them, but he realized the ants might be the least of his worries. He scurried to the window and glanced outside, still hearing the echo of whatever that intrusive noise was. The sky was now a pinkish, yellowish color, but there were no storm clouds, nothing to indicate a thunder storm.

Now that he thought about it, maybe he hadn’t heard anything at all and it was just part of the dream. He turned to the bed and let out a wheeze, freezing in his tracks. His knees wobbled and he almost collapsed to the ground. *The bed... it’s empty... Dotty’s gone! Either I’m still dreaming or this ain’t a dream...*

The sheet that covered her was hung half on the bed, half on the floor. *This is not possible*, he thought, his eyes darting around as if her body might’ve somehow inexplicably slipped under the bed. *Where did she go?* As he leaned closer, he saw ants swarming over the impression on the bed where she once lay.

“God, no!” he blurted out, gagging, cupping his hand over his mouth. He couldn’t hold it in and vomited all over the floor, the sour, acrid chunks splattering his legs.

He took a step, but slipped in his own vomit and fell to the ground. He tried grabbing onto the bed and night stand to stabilize himself, but he could feel his knees weakening under his own weight. “God! What are you doing to me?!” he shouted into the air.

He crawled to the window and stared out again, trying to find some kind of answer out there that didn’t exist. He started crying, his nerves already fragile from such an emotionally punishing night. Then he heard it...

A soft, raspy breathing bellowed from behind him. He looked up and in the window’s reflection saw a silhouette standing in the bedroom doorway. He quickly turned around and there she was. His Dotty, her frail figure teetering, somehow defying gravity with the way she leaned awkwardly forward, her bony shoulders arched back, emaciated arms

hanging limply at her sides. Her head lolled back as if her neck were broken, and in the darkness he could see her mouth still open unnaturally wide. A guttural moan, pained and mournful emanated from her throat.

“Dotty? Christ, Dotty, it’s you!” He stood up, hesitant yet hopeful and walked towards her with extended arms.

Dotty stood rooted in place. Her head lurched forward, finally closing her mouth, but not before thick, brackish saliva spilled forth, dribbling down her chin. Cy paused for a moment and winced. He knew she was dead. She had to be. That *smell*. Her face was so ashen, eyes dark and sunken in. He could see those goddamn ants scurrying all over her; out of her mouth, across her face, into her eyes. She cocked her head and looked at him, but he could see there was no emotion, no recognition, no nothing. He didn’t know how this was happening, but he finally realized he didn’t care. He convinced himself that this was his Dotty, and wherever she was, he wanted to be there too.

Swallowing hard, Cy continued forward, arms outstretched. He gently hugged her. She was icy cold and rigid. He closed his eyes and accepted whatever happened next. When she tore into his neck, he stifled his scream and ignored the pain, instead focusing on the inherent sense of relief he felt as warm blood gushed down his chest. *I’m coming, Dotty...*

ODONTOPHOBIA

George Wilhite

Scott Hansen stepped back from the canvas. *Another twisted masterpiece, you sick bastard.* Why did every painting end up so morbid? No matter what his initial intentions, the result was the same.

His work featured dangerous predators in extreme and macabre displays. Snakes devoured humans whole, swarms of mosquitoes bled victims out, spiders fed on babies. Though his work was graphic and disturbing it drew rave reviews and accolades. It was also a perfect fit for book cover art, comics and horror film promotions. The price of his work soared. Scott was able to make a living solely as an artist by age twenty five.

Scott took a long draw from his water bottle. *Almost time for something stronger. I've done enough work.* He backed up a few feet, examined today's finished product.

The canvas was an eight by twelve foot rectangle. A massive collage covered the surface, a surreal maelstrom of paint turned to terror -- snakes striking children with gaping eyes, lizards with tongues extended and drawing in prey of all species, dogs with multiple heads and exaggerated fangs, spiders feasting on their own young.

Scott knew why these particular animals constantly surfaced in his work.

The phobia dwelt within as far back as he could remember, though his parents could not remember any childhood trauma or event that would have triggered this malady of mind.

He had an irrational phobia of being bitten.

There didn't seem to be a name for this. He searched the web and shuffled through books at the library to no avail.

He certainly had *ophidiophobia*, an irrational fear of snakes, and he was repulsed by all insects to an extent worthy of being diagnosed with *entomophobia*. But it wasn't everything about their nature that he feared -- it was solely the fact that they bit. He knew this because he got the same feeling thinking about vampires or when Hannibal Lecter lunges for that guard's face in *Silence of the Lambs*.

Once a girlfriend gave him a hickey and he nearly passed out from the trauma. Of course, she broke up with him and told half the school. Nobody made the connection to biting directly. They all just assumed he had some serious sexual hang-up.

If I'm such a freak they don't have a name for it, I'll make up my own, he had decided. *Odontophobia* seemed as good as any. Though that would literally be the fear of *teeth*, he supposed, he stuck with it so his problem had a label.

"Yes, you're sick," Scott said, rolling his eyes at his own madness before him.

"No kidding."

Scott turned to discover his girlfriend, Katy, had entered the studio. He smiled, a bit taken aback she caught him talking to himself.

"Hope you don't mind. I let myself in."

"Wouldn't give you a key if I minded."

He took her in his arms and kissed her gently. Katy was five foot four, six inches shorter than Scott. Her short cropped red hair and sincere blue eyes completed a picture of a woman that should have been unattainable to him, a dark haired troubled artist with severe social anxiety. She was always perky and had tons of friends. He had no clue what she was doing with him.

Katy withdrew after his brief kiss and walked a couple of steps back.

"Uh, oh," Scott muttered.

"I'm sorry, Scott. I don't think this is working out."

"Are you nuts? Just last night..."

"I know. I've been putting this off."

Scott exhaled a deep sigh and shrugged his shoulders. "I knew it was too good to be true. I'm such a loser."

"Come on. We had some good times. We never said it was anything but just kicking it, did we?"

"No. I'm the problem. I don't date people like you. I see commitment where I want to whether it's there or not."

"I just wanted to make a clean break. I'm going to that beach party tonight and..."

"Jesus, no. If you don't want to be with me, that's one thing, but you're gonna hang out with those lame asses?"

"Derek invited me."

“Christ! You’re gonna be with him now?” Derek was more her type, he knew. So she *was* just like the other girls he had tried to date.

“It’s just an invite to a party, for Christ’s sake.”

“But you made sure to break up with me before you slap on your bikini and shake your ass for those jocks. I get it. Get out of here.”

“Why’s it have to be like this, Scott?”

“Like what? I’m supposed to happy we’re in bed together one night and the next day, this?”

“I wanted to tell you earlier in the night, but...”

“Then, you decided, what the hell, why not a pity fuck?”

“Oh, Jesus, Scott. We *didn’t* make a commitment.”

“Just go.”

She handed him the key.

He grabbed it.

She left without another word.

Typical, Hansen. You can’t keep a girl happy no matter what you say or do. Give it up, you freak. Just keep painting these throwbacks to a Night Gallery episode and take your checks to the bank. People suck, just like all these friggin’ animals you can’t stand.

Instinct consumed him. While he pissed and moaned, another canvas appeared on his easel. The familiar adrenaline fueling his hatred toward his usual subject matter, the creatures, guided him, but this afternoon the angst seemed bound up in his emotions of losing another woman in his life.

His paintings usually started with snakes or other wretched creatures. Humans came last if he painted them at all. But in aggressive strokes, Katy’s portrait filled the canvas. *Wow, you must have really loved this one.* He had never painted such a large human face.

Enraged by her reappearance on the canvas, he threw globs of paint toward it, providing more abstraction. Nausea rose, the taste of acid in his throat. Sweat and gooseflesh broke out on his skin. These same symptoms surfaced when anxiety over snakes and spiders nearby overtook him.

Scott flinched, realized he had lost track of time. This happened sometimes when inspiration overwhelmed him. He would wake from a short fugue and see a lot of work done on a painting before him that he didn’t remember doing.

The image before him was Katy’s face with venomous snakes entwined in her hair, a Gorgon glaring at him from the canvas. He

continued to paint in aggressive strokes and while her face was still visible within the chaos he covered the rest of the painting with his usual grotesque creations.

Time stood still...

* * *

Scott woke up on the floor of the studio. He clutched a bourbon bottle in his right hand and a paintbrush in his left. He didn't remember opening the bottle and could not believe it was two thirds empty. Head throbbing, stomach churning, his last clear memory was the break-up.

"Crap," he groaned. *Passed out again. I need to get a grip.* As he sat up, trying to clear his head, Scott saw the painting. *Oh my God. I guess I was a little pissed off.* He chuckled at his own insane work.

The creatures converging on Katy's image were some of the vilest creations of his career. The insistent use of red suggested blood splattered on the canvas. Her mouth was twisted in a painful crooked line and he could almost hear her screaming from the canvas.

I better destroy this before someone sees it and locks me up.

His cell phone rang. He didn't want to answer but decided he should. Perhaps Katy had changed her mind? *Dream on, loser.*

"Hello," he muttered.

"Scott? It's Derek."

"Uh, huh."

"You sound bad. You okay."

"Hung over. Look, if you're calling to gloat..."

"What?"

"You and Katy. Pretty friggin' obvious that's why she broke up with..."

"Scott, don't say another word you'll regret."

"I won't regret telling you what I think of you."

"Hey! Wait."

Scott disconnected. "Asshole."

Two hours later, Scott heard pounding on the front door. He had stumbled to the small bedroom behind his work space and immediately gone back to sleep. He swung the door open, irritated by this interruption to nursing his hangover and gaped at the insistent caller. "What's so damn

important it can't wait, Derek? Where's Katy? I know you're together. You deny it?"

"Please, Scott. Shut up and listen to me for a freaking minute."

Derek looked troubled.

"Is something wrong, then?" Scott asked.

"That's what I've been trying to tell you."

Scott let him in. Derek was everything he was not. Taller and well-built, athletic, with well-styled blond hair, he dressed well and was the life of any party. In this moment, however, he was solemn.

"So what's up?" Scott asked.

"You got a beer or something?"

"You got some nerve."

"Listen, Scott. I need alcohol for this and so do you. Trust me."

"*Trust* you?" Derek was looking at the ground. "Fine. Hold on."

Scott returned with a large pour of bourbon. "Something even stronger. I'm fine. *You* can trust *me* on that. Sit down."

They sat in two director's chairs near Scott's work area. Scott saw the painting on the easel. Derek had not looked in that direction yet. He wished he had taken the damn thing down.

Derek drank half of the whiskey in one gulp. He hung his head.

"Come on, man." Scott whined. *Fucker steals my girlfriend and now wants to lay some personal shit on me?*

"She's dead, Scott."

"Who?"

Derek finished his drink and set the glass on the floor. "Katy."

"What?" Scott stood up. "Is this a joke?"

"Hardly." Derek made eye contact for the first time.

I've played poker with this guy. He may be some god to every woman he meets but he isn't a very good bluffer, so he's probably a lousy liar in general.

"I will go get a fucking bottle after all."

Scott went into the kitchen. He wasn't sure what Derek was up to, but took a minute to try to let this sink in. Dead? Derek had to be fucking with him, but why? Guilt welled up over his artistic assault on Katy. If this was true, the way they left things between them, and his extreme reaction, was so wrong.

Damn that painting. I was here all night, drank myself to sleep. Of course, I had nothing to do with her death, but that portrait's gonna make people wonder.

Scott took a deep breath and left the kitchen. Shit! Derek now stood in front of the painting, his face twisted in disgust.

"Here we are," Scott said. He held out the bottle in invitation.

Derek turned, glaring at him. "What the fuck is that?" He pointed at the easel.

Scott shrugged. "Guess I took my anger out on the canvas." He smirked.

"You better think good and hard about my next question, asshole."

"Whoa! Hey, so she broke up with me and I was a little pissed and I painted that. I didn't know it was the last time I'd see her. Of course I'll destroy it. I was gonna do that anyway."

"I haven't asked you my question."

"That's because I interrupted you and started to explain to you why you should back the fuck off." Scott set the bottle and glass on the floor below him, watching Derek. *I'm no fighter, but I want my hands free if this guy jumps me.*

"You are going to *answer* this question. *When* did you paint that?"

"I told you. Last night. I started working right after Katy left. Work relieves stress for me. Sometimes. Next thing I knew, she came out onto the canvas."

"Last night. Right away. Sure about that, huh?" Derek's words were strained now. His face screwed up.

"Yes and yes and yes. What's your problem?"

"Sit down."

"I'm fine."

"Sit the fuck down." Derek moved towards Scott. Fists clenched, he meant business.

"Calm down. Fine." Scott picked up the bottle, removed the cap and took a long drink before sitting down on one of the chairs.

Derek stood in front of him, pacing, watching his every move. "So you were here all night?"

"Yes."

"Anyone else visit you?"

"What are you? A cop all of a sudden?"

“Be careful, Scott. I have something to tell you. Katy was bitten by snakes.”

Scott tried to stay calm. What should he do? He was freaked out, but the last thing he wanted to do was give Derek any ammunition. “Snakes? At the beach?” His skin crawled. *My girl... ex-girlfriend... dies from the very creatures I loathe?*

“Yeah, everyone’s scratching their heads. California coastline in late summer. Christ! It’s almost September. Maybe you might run into a rattlesnake kicking around in the woods up here, but not on the fucking beach!”

“That’s some fucked up shit.”

“Cut the crap, Hansen. Katy dies of a freak accident. Not just one snake, but *five*, attacked her and you painted *that*. I came here to give you a heads up, but I’m sure the cops will not be far behind. I wanted you to tell me what you did.”

“What are you talking about, you paranoid freak?”

“Someone must have planted those snakes. One stray snake would be an odd occurrence. But five? We were...well, what difference does it make now? We moved away from the party. We were making out pretty heavy, probably headed for sex. We were only on the sand for a minute or so and the snakes appeared.

“I mean *appeared*, as in *out of nowhere*. They were just there all of a sudden. I didn’t hear any warning rattlers. They were just there. And then...”

Derek started crying.

“You guys didn’t just get together,” Scott said. “You’ve been seeing each other a while, haven’t you?”

“Don’t make this about that. Last night would have been the first time. That doesn’t matter right now. The snakes. All over her. Not like just biting because they felt threatened. They... Jesus Christ, Scott. They attacked like they were possessed or something. Full of anger, like people, not just animals acting on instinct.”

Scott almost threw up as he listened to this description. As pissed as he was that Katy lied to him, kept this budding relationship from him, the desire to lunge at Derek or curse Katy was overpowered by his revulsion of the monsters being portrayed. *Odontophobia raged.*

“So, I am here to ask you if you did this, Scott. I need to know.”

Scott knew Derek was speaking again but didn't hear him, not the words anyway. His mind pictured the snakes striking Katy. He looked at her portrait again. Though hideous, it didn't come close to the disgust overwhelming him as he imagined her death.

"I asked you a question."

Scott yammered nonsense.

"If you don't answer, I'm going to assume I'm right." Derek was in the stance of one about to strike.

"No, no, of course not. Jesus, Derek! You know about my phobia."

"I know you've said some shit since junior high about hating snakes or something."

"Not just snakes."

"Whatever. It's horse shit. You made it up to sell some art."

"It goes far back. Further back than before I even admitted anything to other kids. It's not bullshit. Listen. Back off, okay? I'm just as sad about Katy as you. Dead! Fuck, it hasn't even sunk in yet, because I have to worry about what you're gonna do."

"Just seems like a hell of a coincidence, Hanson." Derek had moved back a couple steps but Scott stayed on guard.

"I swear I didn't."

"You'd say that either way."

"Look. I have something to tell you. It came to mind in these last few minutes. If you calm down, sit here. Hear me out. It's related, I think. It'll probably freak you out. But I didn't kill Katy and I could never handle any fucking snakes."

"I don't have time for this, Hanson."

"Yes, you do. You want to hear it. Trust me. Just long enough for me to tell you a story, but one that's relevant."

"Give me the bottle."

"I think we should hold off on..."

"Give me the bottle. I'll hear you out, but you don't make the rules. After talking to all of us last night, the cops know you're Katy's ex. That probably brings them to your doorstep later today, maybe tomorrow since it's Sunday. But if I tell them about your painting..."

"They'll be right over. Got it." Scott took another swig, and then handed the bottle to Derek. "Eighth grade. We knew each other by then, right?"

"I knew who you were. You hung out with the dorks."

"Right." *Smartass*. "Well. You remember all that business with Peter Hamilton?"

"Hamilton." Derek took another hit from the bottle. "Oh, yeah. I remember that kid. One of those dudes that just sort of disappeared. They put his face on a milk carton and all that."

"That's the guy." Scott wasn't sure about this. Part of him wanted to tell this story for years but he always worried about the consequences. Well, he was in a pile of shit now, either way. "Kind of a bully, right?"

"Well, I'm ashamed to admit it now, but I was like that too... hey, right, now I remember. That guy bullied *you* all the time. Had a real hard-on for 'ya." Derek snickered.

"Whatever. Well, yeah. He was one of those idiots. The more you show your fear and intimidation, the more they torture you. Vicious cycle. Well, I just grinned and bore it like I always did. I was a target for these sadists."

"What's this got to do with..."

"I'm getting' there, man. Hold on. Remember that art contest I won?"

"Sure, that's when you became cool. You were still a dork and the sensitive artist type, but that comic book art you entered also made everyone notice you. Oh yeah and Peter thought he was the best. You beat him and he got all pissed off."

"And bullied me all the more. He always won that contest before I came on the scene, the new kid at the school. Summer came about a month after the contest and I thought he would calm down. I didn't see him all summer since we hung out with different kids. Then, I go back to school. Eighth grade. I figured I might have a chance, not being a shrimpy seventh grader anymore and maybe the contest gave me some cool."

"That turned out to be somewhat true. I made some friends finally. But Peter? Shit. It was like the moment he saw me, I became the object of his hatred all over again. He beat me up a few times and taunted me constantly."

"Hansen," Derek said. "Are you going to tell me you had something to do with him disappearing?"

"You said you'd hear me out. It's not that simple."

Derek paused, rolled his eyes. "Go on."

“The bastard made every school day hell. Even though I was no longer a whipping boy in general for all the other bullies, Peter fucked with me enough to make up for that in spades.

“One day, he cornered me in a bathroom and kicked me in the balls so hard I passed out for a few seconds. When I came around again, the asshole was gone. I was more pissed than ever. I went home that day and... well, what do I care telling you now? I bawled like a stupid cry baby. A blathering idiot.

“Then, without even thinking about it, I began sketching. My right hand seemed freakin’ possessed or something. I am used to this kind of pace now when I get *in the zone* but that was the first time I ever created like that. Raw, unfiltered, just sketching away, mind to paper.

“Eventually my hand slowed down and I looked at my work. What I saw freaked me out. I had sketched a perfect likeness of Peter, down by the creek we all used to play in on our way home from school.

“And I had covered him with snakes, rats, even some alien-looking animals from my psyche I didn’t recognize. That fear of being bitten, though still a secret at that point from most everybody, was with me, and I had -- on paper -- unleashed the creatures on Peter.”

Derek laughed, took a big drink. “Holy, shit, Hansen. You trying to tell me...”

“Derek, hold up. I’ve followed every detail of that case. Peter disappeared the very next day. Now, sure, that can still be a coincidence, right? But I’m telling you, I read that book that retired cop wrote about it. Said the last time anyone saw Peter Hamilton was down by that creek at the same time I was drawing that picture!”

“Come on, man. Are you nuts?”

“Why did you want to know when I painted that, then?”

“Hansen. I wondered if you painted it *after* you did something to Katy. To gloat. Maybe you only meant to scare her with the snakes. Whatever. But I didn’t think the picture *made it happen!* You *are* crazy if you think I’m gonna believe something like that.”

“I just wanted to tell somebody what happened before because this seemed so similar.”

“I’ll tell what’s *similar*. You probably killed Hamilton just like you killed Katy.”

“For Christ’s sake, we’ve been through this. I couldn’t have done either of them. I hate anything or anyone that bites. I call it *odontophobia*.”

Derek rose to his feet. “I’m calling the cops.” He set the bottle down on the chair, fumbling for his cell phone. “They’re gonna love your story.”

“No! You have to help me figure out what’s happening. I didn’t hurt anyone.”

“I am doing this.”

Derek pulled his cell from his pocket.

Panicked, Scott grabbed the bottle. He had never acted out in violence in his life. All those years, when bigger boys beat him up and later when men shoved him around, he just took it. Never fought back. Now today, he confides in another macho asshole and the guy wants to sic the cops on him?

Hell, no.

With all the force he could muster, fueled by years of passivity coupled with agitation, Scott smashed the bottle into the side of Derek’s head. Derek dropped his phone and Scott kicked it out of the way. Derek reeled before him, but he knew it wouldn’t be long before the bigger man would fight back.

The bottle had broken when it struck Derek’s skull. The edges of the glass left in Scott’s hand were jagged.

Scott saw his portrait of Katy again. Rage consumed him as he imagined her and Derek fucking on the beach.

“You asshole!” Derek charged forward.

My only chance, Scott thought. He slashed Derek’s throat with the remains of the bottle. Blood spewed from the wound, drenching them both as Derek fell on top of him. Derek was twitching, gurgling sounds coming from his throat, but still delivered a few punches to Scott’s midsection. Scott thrust the jagged glass into his throat again. Seconds later, Derek was dead.

* * *

The world only made sense with palette in hand and canvas on easel.

Though he had his suspicions something uncanny was afoot with his artwork, that perhaps he was responsible for two deaths through the

transformation of his fear and anger into art and then something else, Scott never imagined he would kill someone by his own hand.

This murder had sent him into a panic. For nearly an hour he sat, drank more bourbon and stared at Derek's corpse. His stomach heaved twice, though nothing came up. The pooling and then coagulation, of the blood held a bizarre fascination as acceptance developed of what he had done.

When he finally rose from his chair, Scott considered his options. Call the cops? Not a great idea. If Derek was right, they would find him soon enough. No need to rush to confess.

Should he run away? That sounded good for a minute or two, but he didn't know where he'd go. The few friends he had were in his hometown. Though he had amassed an impressive nest egg from his art sales, he was no household name. His profile only included a cursory bio on his pieces and no photo. Nobody would recognize him. He could get lost for a while.

But he decided against flight as well.

He just started painting.

For the slightest passing moment, he thought about creating something other than his usual grotesqueries, but instinct took over once more. As he worked, he forgot all about the corpse in the room, what the hell he was going to do about it.

A creature appeared on the canvas. It resembled a rat, one of his feared creatures, but with much longer and sharper teeth than any species on Earth. Scott had already sketched a crude outline of Derek's body in the center of the canvas and the rat-thing, maw wide open, was clearly headed for the dead man's face.

Scott heard a scurrying sound behind him. Turning around, he saw a real-life replica of the rat monster from his painting tearing into Derek's neck.

You're hallucinating. He turned back to the canvas and drew more of the creatures on top of Derek, feasting on his stomach and chest. Behind him he heard the sounds of gnawing and slurping. *Now you've really lost it. This isn't happening.*

He didn't turn around until he was finished with the painting. In that moment, he realized another bizarre truth surfaced while he worked. *I haven't felt the least bit revolted as I painted this scene, drenched in images of my odontophobia. Am I cured?*

The creatures ate their fill and then vanished like ghosts. There was so little left of Derek's corpse that the remains might be disposed of, the mess cleaned up, without Scott being caught after all.

Vitality rushed through Scott's veins. This newfound power in his art opened novel possibilities. He knew the police might show up any moment and he really should do something about the bones and viscera sprawled before him, but instead he returned to the canvas to let his dark muse shine just a little while longer.

Behind him, he heard scurrying feet again. Perhaps more of his creatures came to gnaw away at the leftovers. A few seconds later, the sounds behind him increased dramatically. *How many are back there?*

He turned and saw dozens of the monster rats charging him. They leapt at him, plunging their teeth into his throat and face. He fell to the ground, his brush and palette falling to the ground. As the monsters surrounded him, he glanced at the canvas above him and understood.

Within the arrogance of his obsessive painting, some other part of his psyche must have risen, a conscience that desired justice be done.

He had painted his own face on Derek's body.

BLOOD INK

Jordan Elizabeth Mierek

She crumpled the paper, smudging the pen marks she'd added into the margins, short questions and little insights. As a corner poked into her hand, the dull pain brought her back to reality. Cristiana tried smoothing the rumpled mess, but it tore a slit in the bottom.

The man beside her laughed, resting his hand over hers. His warm palm swallowed her smaller one like a glove. She stared at it, crumpling the paper again, and pulled away, stumbling backwards into the wall.

"T-th-thank y-you, Mister G-gibb."

He turned away with a graceful bow, reminding her of an Elizabethan courtier. "Please, won't you call me Edgard? Mister Gibb is my grandfather. Why don't we sit in the kitchen and you can tell me more about your story?"

He plucked the paper from her hand, flashing the kind of smile made for toothpaste commercials: blindingly white, perfectly straight. Cristiana licked her teeth, stained from drinking five cups of tea a day, as she followed him from the foyer.

It was still uncomfortable being in his presence even after the fifteen-minute car ride from her apartment. He'd insisted on picking her up. He'd had an appointment in the city, he said, so it was no trouble swinging by her street on his way home.

"We'll go for coffee afterwards," he'd added with a boyish wink when first asking. She hadn't had the gumption to tell him she despised coffee, but after picking her up, he hadn't mentioned it again.

Edgard pulled out a seat at his table and stepped aside so she could sit.

"Thanks." Cristiana ran her hand through her hair. People never treated her like this.

"Beer?" He swung open the door to his refrigerator and picked up a bottle by its slender neck.

"But it's two in the afternoon."

"Live a little." He grabbed two beers, dropping into the seat across from her. Since the bottle waited for her on the table, she sipped.

He smoothed her paper. "This is the query letter for your manuscript?"

"Yeah." Cristiana's hands shook as she pulled out the memory stick from her purse. "This is the whole story. I could've emailed it to you, like I

said before.”

He flashed another toothsome smile. “Christy, I told you. My Internet’s been down for a while. I can call you Christy, can’t I?”

“Um, sure. My parents call me Ana.”

He reached across the table to pat the back of her hand before taking the memory stick. ‘I’m sorry you don’t get along with them.’”

Cristiana took a longer swallow of beer to refrain from answering. She had met Edgard Gibb at a writing seminar. When they were leaving, he had tapped her on the shoulder to compliment her on the story.

“I’m sure your family must enjoy reading your works,” he’d said.

“Oh no,” had been her answer. “I don’t show my writings to my parents. They don’t think my stories are any good. They want me to get a real job.”

“Any job is a real job.”

“Right now I’m just working at a store in the mall.” She’d blushed. “I want to become a full-time authoress.”

He’d chuckled. “Look, I know we were only supposed to give out first names, but I’m Edgard Gibb.”

“Cristiana Belmont.” His name suddenly sunk in like a slap across the face. “Oh my – *you are the Edgard Gibb?* All of your books made national bestsellers! Your book about the baby falling from the sky was made into a movie!”

He’d thrown back his head, shaking with mirth. “The one and only Edgard Gibb, my dear. I’m glad to be so famous. Look, Cristiana, why don’t we get together and discuss your manuscript? I can help you find an agent.” The meeting had been set up, she’d given him her address and now she sat in his kitchen.

“I read over the paper copy you gave me that day at the seminar,” he said. “I really like what you have. You developed the characters well. *Very* well, I should say. Your plot is intricate, but not too confusing. Your clues were excellent and I still didn’t guess the doctor was the real killer.” He dropped his voice to a sultry whisper. “I’m really impressed, Christy.”

She stared at her hands clutching the beer bottle so tightly her knuckles had whitened. The cold brown glass numbed her palms and she licked her lips. “What did you think about Jane? You know... the main character.”

“She’s talented, to say the least. Have you got any ideas for a sequel?”

"I don't want a sequel. They usually aren't as good and I always find them disappointing 'cause I imagined something else to happen."

"You said at the seminar that this is the only manuscript you've written."

"Well, yes." She took another swallow of beer. It stuck in her throat, thick and bitter. "I just wanted to concentrate on one thing and now I'm waiting for another inspiration."

He wrapped his hands around hers. She dropped her gaze from his, eyeing their hands.

"I'm making you nervous. I'm sorry." He didn't remove his hand, though. "You told me at the seminar that you don't have a boyfriend. I asked about that when I queried you to meet me here today, don't you remember?" He kept smiling.

"I remember." She laughed to make it sound cool, rather than pathetic. "I don't really have any friends. Wait, I think I told you that, too. You asked at the seminar if I've ever had friends read it."

He slid his fingertips over the back of her hand, lingering at her wrist before drawing away and standing up. "I want to show you something, Christy." He offered her his arm, bent at the elbow. She slid her hand through his arm after hesitating for a moment. He patted her shoulder, leading her from the kitchen.

"It's an old house. Far back from the road. Never any visitors. It gets... lonely." He brushed his knuckles over her cheek and she winced. "You don't have to be so nervous around me."

"I... I know. It's a wonderful house."

"I shouldn't have to be alone in it." He whisked her from the hallway into a library with tapestry curtains on the windows, drawn back to allow light to pour across bookcases reaching floor to ceiling, stretching across every wall.

She stepped away from him with eyes that widened by the second. "You're never alone with books. Have you read all of them?"

"Of course." He strolled by her to pat a shelf of hard covers. "Come look at this."

"Oh!" She grabbed the first novel. "These are the books you've written! You're like my idol. Other people can spill out their hearts to movie stars and singers all they want. Authors do it for me."

He rested his hand on her shoulder and began to kneed, working his fingers deep. She closed her eyes as he massaged her other shoulder. She sighed, muscles relaxing throughout her body.

His hot breath tickled her earlobe. "Do you remember how, in the car, I told you I love to travel?"

"Yes," she whispered.

His lips brushed over the side of her neck. "Is it working?"

"Is what?" She leaned into his hands. If he meant the massage, then yes, it worked wonders.

"Snake venom."

"Huh?" She tried to face him, but he clamped his hands down hard, pinning her. "What snake venom?"

"The snake venom I slipped into your beer, of course. Didn't you notice the bottle was already opened?"

"No." Her heart thudded, the world spinning.

"I hoped you wouldn't notice the taste. You told me at the seminar that you didn't like beer. You were referencing that man's story about the consequences of becoming drunk." He shoved her away from him. She tripped over her ankles, falling into a bookcase. She grabbed a shelf to stay upright. "You say a lot of things. You shouldn't talk so much to strangers."

"Get away from me!" Cristiana grabbed a book off the shelf and threw it at him, but it sailed by his head to strike the wall.

"You live alone in an apartment. You just paid your rent, so your landlady won't be looking for it any time soon. Plus, she's in Florida visiting her brother. You never talk to your family, so they won't think it odd if they don't hear from you in a while."

Cristiana tried to bolt for the doorway, but he seized her wrists in his fists. He pushed her against the window, pinning her to the frigid glass with his body. She tried to turn her head away, to scream, but he didn't need to tell her that it was pointless. His neighbors lived too far away. No one would hear her, especially not from indoors.

"You don't have any friends. You didn't tell anyone you were coming with me. I had gloves on when I picked you up. I wore nothing conspicuous, just another face in the crowd. I picked *you* up. They don't need to hunt down your car. It's in your driveway safe and sound. They can't connect us together."

“Why are you doing this?” Was he serious about having given her *snake venom*?

He yanked her against him, one hand knotting in her hair to pull back her head, exposing her throat with a hungry gaze akin to a vampire’s. She squeaked, gasping, and it felt like her air passages were closing. Raspy gasps formed in the back of her throat. Loud ringing began in her ears. Her heart sped up, veins throbbing through her body.

She tried to hit him, but he caught both of her wrists in one of his hands, twisting them painfully. She gasped, tears burning her eyes. “Do you know where I get my ideas from?” Hot breath burned her face. His eyes were savage, pupils dilated.

“No!” she gasped, trying to kick him, but her vision was blurring, the room spinning. He shoved her, stepping back as she sprawled on the floor. Her knee crashed into the floor, her hand hitting the wall. For a moment, she couldn’t feel anything, just numbness as if her limbs were gone. In the next second, the pain returned. It sizzled through her like fire, forcing her head back as a scream tore loose.

“I get my ideas from other people,” he hissed when she stopped screaming, panting now.

Hair fell over her face. She stayed on the floor staring up at him, chest heaving, everything swimming brightly like a kaleidoscope. There was a constant pain in her head making her eyes squint.

“I find people like you, Christy dear.” He sauntered near, looming over her with teeth bared in a sadistic smile. “They are people who are nobodies... people who are currently drifting off with the rest of the populace, unimportant and unnoticed. I get you to share your story with me, you and all the others of your kind. You tell me your secrets. You trust me. You let me read it over, help you a little, and then... don’t you see it yet? I steal it.” He snapped his fingers. “Just like that, I steal it! I know how to make it great, but alas, I’m afraid that I lack the imagination to come up with it on my own, so I let my little pawns do it for me. I can’t have any of you telling on me, now can I? No, of course not, for then it would never work. I have to make sure that none of you ever have the chance to tell. It’s simple, really. Eliminate the true author so that it can become me.”

Nothing made sense. His skin glowed. His shirt looked like orange wings protruding from his back. Her ankle throbbed and when she tried to move, needles of pain shot through her leg. Gritting her teeth against it, she

rolled to her knees, head bowed. She couldn't breathe, only able to inhale short little pants. Her lungs wouldn't work right. It felt like there was something huge and thick lodged in her throat.

With an animalistic cry, she launched herself off the floor, grabbing his knees. She shoved her shoulder against his thigh, knocking him over. His foot shot up, kicking her in the elbow, but she rolled. The floor was hard and her ankle twisted, pain making her gasp as the room spun faster. She ran, soreness numbing her ankle, she grabbed the doorframe, pushing her way through into the hallway, pitching to the floor. The ringing in her ears was louder, vision fuzzier. She crawled, crying, everything burned and blurring. There was a door and she was pulling herself up by its knob, slamming it shut. There was a lock! She pushed it in with a click just as Edgard threw himself into the door, hinges rattling. He shook the knob, fists pounding on the wood.

"You can't keep me out! I know where the keys are! You'll lose consciousness soon and then you're mine! They'll never look for you in my woods! *Never!*" His voice shifted to a sugary whine. "Come on, Christy, it's me. It's Edgard Gibb. I'm one of your favorite authors, aren't I? Come on out, Christy. Let's talk about this, okay?"

She leaned against the wall breathing deeply, massaging the corners of her temples. She could feel her veins leaping off her skull. They were trying to rip through her skin.

He kept banging on the door, cursing at her to unlock it. She took another deep breath as she tried to steady herself. She was in his bathroom, everything cold and masculine. There was a comb on the dirty sink, a container of floss. There were shampoo bottles in the tub, shower curtain pulled back.

She sucked in her breath. There was a shelf over the toilet and on it was a candlestick with a white candle in it, brand new. It was a brass candlestick reminiscent of a murder movie.

Cristiana fell against the sink. She pawed at the faucets, swearing even though they turned on easily. Icy water splashed her face, everything cleared and the ringing dulled. She gripped the edge tighter, tried to stand on her toes, reaching for the shelf above the toilet. Too high, it was too high...

Screaming, she toppled over onto the toilet, vaguely glad that the seat was down. She sank to her knees on the floor, hands sliding along the wall with fingers splayed. Using it as a brace, she stood on wobbly legs, leaning

against it. It was cold, so cold and she still had to rise onto her toes. The room was spinning... was this the wall or the floor that she leaned against?

Something hit her hand and she screamed again, couldn't stop screaming even though her throat was closing up. She closed her hand over something and she was falling, something cold and hard jamming into her belly. Things hit the floor, crashes that echoed like bombs through her skull. They were needles, everything spinning faster. She slid off the toilet onto her shoulder, rolling onto her back. It was so bright, too bright, but she forced herself to roll onto her front. The shelf had come crashing down, breaking in half against the toilet seat. There were splinters, one cutting into her wrist, but she didn't notice. Her brain couldn't process what the wet redness was as her hand reached for the candlestick.

By the time Edgard kicked open the door, she had the candlestick in hand, swinging it madly with a wrenching cry. It cracked into his head and his eyes rolled back, body crumpling. He narrowly missed smacking into the toilet.

She grabbed his shoulder, the room spinning again and cried out when she managed to flip him onto his back. She shoved her hand into his pocket. He'd slipped his cell phone in there after getting a message on their way into the house. She'd watched his fingers fly over the keys with envy.

She had to sit, leaning against the wastebasket, panting. She punched in the buttons for 911, gasping when the operator answered after what seemed like an eternity.

"H-h-he's trying to kill me. He's drugged me... I-I-I-I d-don't know w-wh-what to do!" She almost dropped the phone, grabbing her wrist with her other hand to hold it steady. Cristiana barely had time to spit out what she thought was his address before everything faded into a roaring echo.

She came to in the next second as another wave of pain coursed over her body. She cringed, rolling onto her belly, vomiting onto the floor. She managed to stand up, hands sliding against the wall. There was something there scraping and clunking and she realized his cell phone was still clutched in her fist. She threw it at the tub, feeling for the doorway. She found the door, stumbled out into the hallway. There was something wrong with her arm. It was soaking wet. She had to hold onto the wall, but she managed to look at it. Red, it was so red. Blood. It was bleeding.

She staggered away from the wall, her feet moving of their own accord. She was stumbling, falling. Blood, so much blood and it was

everywhere, smearing across her clothes.

She fell onto her back, chest rising and falling with hoarse little pants as she tried to draw air into her lungs. Walls of color rose up around her, a rainbow that blurred and spiraled. Books... she was back in his library. She lifted her hand, reaching for them even though she knew that she'd never be able to succeed and all she saw was the scarlet blood before the whirling sucked her down into a thoughtless oblivion.

* * *

Cristiana awoke with a throbbing headache and a heart monitor beeping nearby. She stretched her jaw, moaning, and suddenly her mother was there, bending over her with a worried frown.

"How are you feeling? The nurse will be back in a second, sweetheart."

"Mama? What... what happened?"

Her mother closed her eyes, pressing the back of her hand to her opened mouth, lips trembling. "I won't lecture you, not now, but Ana, how could you have possibly gone to a stranger's house alone? It's a good thing that the police got there when they did, otherwise..." Her mother broke off with a strangled cry, eyes squeezing shut.

"He drugged me," Cristiana whispered.

"No, he poisoned you! You're safe now. They got it out of your system."

Cristiana didn't feel like asking how. "He killed others! He buried them somewhere out in his woods! Mama, I -- "

"You don't have to do anything right now. The police will be here soon enough to talk to you. Your Edgard Gibb is already arrested for what he did to you. He's not going anywhere now."

Cristiana sighed, settling back into her pillow. There were voices outside, calm and hushed, steady.

"Mama?"

"What is it, sweetheart?"

"I know what my sequel's going to be about."



WITHIN THE OWL'S REST

Danica Green

The creaking door sent an echo around the entrance chamber of the mansion, reverberating into the adjoining rooms and lingering longer than seemed necessary. Arthur took a cursory glance around and removed his hat, an automatic act of politeness that was not strictly required when in the presence of none but a withered old man who stood wringing gnarled hands by his side.

“Mr. Kingsley, are you quite sure about this?” the man asked, trembling vowels and more furious wringing. Arthur nodded calmly and smiled reassurance.

“Quite sure Mr. Lowell. I've seen many a haunted house in my day and it always turns out to be bluster and hearsay.”

“As you say sir, as you say.”

“Would you care for a cup of tea?” Arthur asked, gesturing to the suitcase that sat by his feet. “I brought supplies with me.”

Mr. Lowell's nervousness was palpable, more so for the fact that he stood upon the threshold, refusing to enter, and Arthur was not at all surprised when the man excused himself and left, closing the door behind him which set off another echo that let loose a sprinkling rain of paint chips from the untended walls and ceiling.

Arthur hefted his case and began to walk to the staircase that sat grandly in the middle of the chamber, the deep blue carpets still luxurious despite their lack of care. As he ascended, he braced himself for a chill to the spine and found himself chuckling when it did not come. There was a catalogue of sensations and stereotypes to haunted houses that he always ticked off as he went, and a chill on the stairs was perhaps the most recognised. Many people would claim a place to be haunted if not for that reason alone but Arthur always took pleasure in explaining that the architecture of these buildings was such that many found a breeze from the windows coalescing on a central set staircase, and it was not evidence of the supernatural.

He crossed it off the list in his mind and began to think through the rest of his repertoire. Doors that closed by themselves, candles suddenly extinguished, both easy to explain in the same manner as the chill on the

stairs. A simple matter of poorly made windows and cold weather. The creaks in the night, and other seemingly unexplained noises, were due to the age of the house, or, in newer houses, often poor workmanship or trees tapping against glass from outside.

In all his years investigating these phenomena he had never come across a case he could not explain and his clients usually walked away happy. A handful would refuse to listen to him and continued to believe that some entity inhabited their home but Arthur always got paid and truly it was their loss if they should wish to relocate over childish superstition.

Reaching the head of the stairs, he looked both ways along the corridor before opting to take the left. This house was unique in that over the course of his career he had only ever been commissioned by scared tenants and angry home-owners, but this particular building had lain empty for some time. He knew of many areas deemed haunted in and around the country but those which were not owned or long abandoned never required his services as people tended to pretend they did not exist and leave them be. Mr. Lowell, his employer, was an architect who had finally received permission to knock down this mansion known as The Owl's Rest after a long campaign. It had taken years to verify that the property had no living owner and Lowell had paid a hefty sum to purchase the land when it was deemed abandoned. The history of the building was truly frightening, however, and that was why Arthur had been called, to ascertain that no spirits would be angered by the demolition and seek revenge on the men who caused it to be so.

The hall had many doors to either side and Arthur chose one at random, emerging in a good sized bedroom, sparsely furnished and littered with debris. The guests in the house had evacuated quickly one night and many things still lay untouched on tables and in cupboards. The payment for this job had been grand but included the proviso that on the day of his leaving he take anything of value to the entrance hall to be collected by Lowell's men, who refused to set foot inside.

His stay was set at a single night. A delay on his train meant that the hour was already late and he was to leave at noon the following day when he would be met by Lowell and his company. Depending on what he had to report, the demolition would begin immediately. Arthur placed his suitcase next to the bed and wafted the sheets and pillows a few times to dislodge a

layer of dust, and then changed into his nightclothes and rooted around in his case, removing a small kettle, a flask of water and a pouch of tea leaves.

While he assumed from the reports that the kitchen would still hold a majority of its supplies, and indeed counted on that for use of a cup, he had worried that any kettles would have rusted years past and packed his own just in case. He removed his matches and lantern, lit it and carried it in one hand with the tea, while the rest of the items balanced in the crook of his other arm.

As he left the room and turned towards the staircase, a chill ran from somewhere further up the corridor and a door creaked open in the distance. Arthur shook his head and smiled, then continued onwards, trying not to drop the things he carried as the chill he had been anticipating finally arrived and made its way into his spine.

A sudden piercing whistle sound surrounded him. He tried his hardest not to reach for his ears with his burdened arms. His eyes closed tightly, teeth locked in a grimace against the noise, its pitch assaulting his eardrums. It ceased as suddenly as it had begun and Arthur breathed out, opened his eyes and blinked rapidly until his vision was clear again. A wail emerged from his throat and he blinked several times again, trying to focus on the image in front of him.

At the head of the stairs, the hazy image of a young girl stood watching, a bloodstained white nightdress clothing her form. As his eyes began to adjust, he began to whine, as he noted that she had only one eye in her head, the other an empty socket that stared brutally at his face. It was not the worst about her, however, as he took in the perpetual grimace of teeth that stood in a face without lips, jagged skin surrounding the maw where her smile should be and the livid scar of a burn which could be glimpsed beneath her knee-length clothing. It ran from her toes to the knee, then on to somewhere above her hem.

He blinked once more, hard, and when he opened his eyes again the apparition was gone and he stood alone in the corridor. He calmed his rapid breathing and dug his bare toes into the carpet to ground himself in reality. He had never been prone to the hysteria that led to hallucinations but there was a first time for everything. This house was indeed far more atmospheric, with a far more sordid past than any other he had encountered and perhaps it was causing him more distress than he had realised.

It took a moment for him to move again -- legs weakened by the sudden fear -- and he approached the spot where the vision had stood with caution. There was no sign that anything had been there, no blood or indents in the carpet, no coldness or sense of dread. Arthur berated himself for such novice fancies and descended the staircase, making his way cautiously through several small rooms until he emerged in the kitchen.

The kitchen lacked a lot of the debris and chaos that was evident within many other rooms of the house and Arthur surmised that those who had fled the house did not pass through this way; they had not been here long. He placed the lantern upon the wooden table and began to pour water into the kettle. The fireplace even had a set of dry logs still stacked neatly next to it and he began a blaze, hanging the kettle over the flames to boil.

As he thought upon the strange vision he had seen upon the stairs, Arthur reflected on the history of the strange mansion. It was said that the owners had been a suitably wealthy couple with, Arthur thought with pause, a young daughter. The entire household had been quiet and reserved folk. Despite their wealth, they had employed no servants and it was assumed they grew all their own food in a large garden as they never came to the town on market days. No one had ever seen the faces of the man who owned the building or his daughter, but his wife was often noted looking out from a top floor window in the night though she did not linger long enough for any of the curious townsfolk to give an accurate description. When the family had deigned to host a party for common guests, it had been the talk of the market and no fewer than seventy people had arrived to take advantage of the opportunity to glimpse of the mysterious occupants of the house that loomed over their town.

Reports had ended there, and no record existed of what had happened inside the house. One hundred years had passed since that day and all that remained were letters written to relatives by invited guests, letters full of awe and curiosity. All that was known was that half the people who entered did not return, and those who did, after mere hours within the walls of The Owl's Rest, were utterly mad, or pale and silent, dying several days later from what the doctors had determined to be a malaise of the soul.

Arthur's reverie was deep and it was only the sputter of boiled water escaping the kettle and hissing into the fire that awoke him. He hurried over to remove it. A quick check found him a teacup and he poured water onto the leaves, breathed in the bitter fragrance. He checked that his lantern

would last long enough for him to enjoy the tea and return to bed with illumination. He took a sip, seated on the stool by the fire and listened to the clanks and grinds that drifted towards him from other sections of the house.

The owners of the mansion, and their child, had never been seen or heard from again and the wildest speculations said that it was a case of murder, torture that had driven the escapees insane, that led to their eventual deaths. As for the family, the tales ranged from their hurried escape to suicide. The guards had been called and, along with a host of angered townsfolk who were brave enough, they had entered The Owl's Rest, returning less than an hour later to say that they had nothing to report, that the house was empty with no sign of either the family who inhabited it or the thirty or so townsfolk who had never returned home. It is possible the legends of the place would have stopped there, if not for the fact that each guard and courageous resident who had returned with no word of foul play had experienced thrashing nightmares, violent convulsions in the night with bloodstains from nails dug too far into palms, yet not a one could remember that they had been in distress upon waking, and not a one could recall the nature of their dreams.

Arthur found himself drinking the tea more quickly than he would usually have done, for while he preferred to savour the beverage, and although the kitchen was warm and comfortable, he could not shake the memory of the ghost upon the stairs and found himself craving sleep and the morning. He left the fire to burn itself out and put his supplies into a cupboard, minus the lantern which he held before him, and the cup which he left upon the table, and he began to walk back towards the entrance chamber.

He passed through two small sitting rooms, and as he entered a third he found his eyes casting around in the shadows, noticing that the door by which he had previously made his way was now closed, despite his insistent knowledge he had left it open. As he reached to turn the handle, his eyes were drawn across the room again and it was then he noticed the family portrait that hung above a fireplace on the wall to his right.

As he looked around again, he realised that he had not passed through this room on his way here, though it was the only way he could have gone. Arthur looked back to the painting, studying it, and could not turn away. He found himself walking over to it though his mind was cogent enough to continue insisting that he should make his way to bed.

The man in the painting was possessed of large bones and a round face, and the child did not smile, with her eyes cast to the floor, face hidden. The woman was thin, pale, a hint of something unsavoury in her dead gaze, and arms that held too far from her body the babe that lay swaddled in them. Arthur held the lantern closer to the painting. The babe was somehow strange, too angular, lumps poking through the blanket which wrapped it in every direction. He peered closer until his nose nearly touched the scene.

Then, he screamed.

The child in the swaddling was no child at all, but a baby goat with pointed horns, large eyes and bone white teeth grinning from a severe mouth. Images crowded Arthur's senses -- the painting, the girl upon the stairs -- and lastly -- the thought and name of Baphomet, goat-demon, who walks before Lucifer to announce his arrival in the mortal world. That idea came from his basic stock of knowledge on the subject, yet he automatically knew it to be true. He backed into a couch behind him, turned and ran towards the door, threw it open and ran into a wooden table with a small dust of tea leaves spread across it. He looked around at the kitchen and then behind him at the cupboards, the door through which he must have entered nowhere to be seen.

"This is madness," Arthur whimpered to the air, eyes fixed in front of him.

There was only one door out of the kitchen, and it stood open as he had left it. Now, however, there were no intervening rooms; it led straight into the room with the painting. His heart thudded painfully against his ribs and his head was filled with terrifying scenarios. He reached in to his mind and tried to pull out logical explanations, finding none.

"Arthur," he said to himself with a trembling voice. "Hallucinations. Hysteria. There are any number of things that could be affecting your mind. Simply walk to the entrance chamber and return to bed."

He continued to stand by the table, immobile, loathe to return to the room with the vile portrait or the stairs that now struck so much fear into his breast. Eventually, Arthur simply removed his supplies from the cupboard and poured himself another cup of tea, sat down at the table and drank his beverage slowly while he thought through any other options that might remain to him. When naught but the dregs were left, he rose, eyes never moving from the kitchen door that led back to the room that frightened him so. In a bid to focus upon normality, he made sure to tidy the kitchen again,

supplies in the cupboard, teacup left on the table for the morning, and when he was fully out of ways to stall the inevitable, he picked up the lantern and began to walk forward again until he stood at the threshold.

Raising the lantern off to the right, Arthur eyed the painting from a distance and shook his head, breathing deeply. *A joke, he thought, some kind of strange, sick joke. A painting done by a friend. A family with macabre tastes. It means nothing.*

As he entered the room and walked towards the door, he tried to keep his eyes focused ahead but they kept drifting towards the painting, -- his mind screaming the name of Baphomet -- and when he looked back before him he saw a small diary lying in his path. He knew it had not been there before, yet his rational mind came up with explanations for the sake of his sanity. The cover was a pleasant childish pink, smeared with the deep maroon of old blood on fabric.

A chill ran through the room and ruffled the pages. The book fell open to reveal a neat scrawl in black ink. Arthur picked it up and looked at the pages that had been revealed. A quick glance gave the name *Tabitha* at the bottom of the open entry, signed with a small star above the *I*, a childhood fancy that felt grief well up within Arthur, though he could not determine why. There was no date, no cursory *Dear...*, addressing the entry to an imaginary friend, nothing but the writing and the star to remind himself that these were the most private thoughts of a human mind.

It hurts. The cold makes it worse. MaMa says I will be better soon but i think she lies. She and Pappa went away for a hole day and when they caym back they wer so pale.

Arthur could feel the eyes of the painting watching him as he read, burrowing as a tick into his deepest fears and seeking to make them real. The once amusing sounds of closing doors and creaking boards became vivid, loud in his ears, coming from every direction at once. To ignore them was a great difficulty but some scant curiosity left in Arthur's mind caused him to turn to the front of the diary and learn its secrets from the beginning.

Tabitha Ballatyne.

It was written on the inside cover of the book in a far neater hand which must have belonged to one of her parents, a suspicion confirmed by the lack of a star atop her name. The first few entries were mundane, the girl who appeared in the family painting to be about the age of eight clearly much younger here, inexperienced with writing and saying little about herself and her life. She wrote of her fondness for the diary, a gift for some unknown occasion, and spoke in admiration of her parents whom she clearly loved. As the book went on and the child aged, the writing became neater, though her tenuous grasp of grammar belied any formal education, which made sense when the rumours of how reclusive the family had been came to mind. In time, the content also became more personal as though the girl, Tabitha, knew her words would no longer be observed by prying adults.

MaMa says im very sick. So sick that a doctor wuld not help.

The entries continued in much the same vein for several pages, and the image of a child with a painful cancer formed in Arthur's mind. She wished to play outside, to meet other children and have a life outside of her festering sickbed but she was denied. Arthur could not glean from the writings whether this was a case of her mother's fear to expose the child to some life-ending bug that could ravage her already weakened form, or if the child was too weak to move. The words later began to lose their beautiful script, as whatever foul illness stole her strength also robbed her of her cursive hand through weakened fingers and blurring vision. It was perhaps in noticing this that Arthur stopped poring over the entries with rapidity when he came upon an entry that harked back to her strength, each word more delicately formed than even the ones on the page that preceded it.

i woke up tудay and the pain was gone. I told MaMa and she wuld not speak to me. I told her agen, i said MaMa it doesnt hurt no more and she walked away. Pappa cried wen i told him. I asked him why he was crying and he cried harder. The shutter banged in the wind and he screamed.

Arthur read each subsequent entry with greater care, feeling mentally pulled in to the world of this child and the ever increasing madness of her parents. They stopped speaking to her at all and she learned to cook in order to feed

herself. It was a sweet thing, how many of these entries spoke of her adventures into the culinary world on her own and her love of learning the art, yet each came tainted with the clear absence of any authority figure.

i made a stew tудay. There was some meet left in the pantry wich was good becose i canot butcher the pigs myself. I fell by the fire and my dress cought lite but wen i yelled for MaMa she did not come. I took off my dress and threw it into the flames but my leg hurts a lot.

It seemed that the wound grew infected and while the girl used any small skill she knew of to treat it, there was little that could be done and it grew worse until it pained her terribly, threatening to poison her blood and do that which her cancer was denied.

I culd not find my anywun for days and when i did it hurt so much that i was sick and hot and culdnt move. I showed it to Pappa and he kised my face and then left the room.

Then the next:

The pain in my leg is gone just gone like the pain in my chest and now Pappa don't cry no more but he is just as pale as MaMa.

Arthur skimmed through until the pages began to show signs of damage, presumably crumpled from the marks of old tears and he read of the troubles of Tabitha's mother who became frightfully sick, delirious, until she could no longer recognise her own child. When Arthur reached the last two entries in the heartbreaking tome he felt a clenching of his jaw and neck that tried to force him not to look back towards the ghastly painting. The words were large, haphazard as though scrawled in haste and the signing of her name, once so simply whimsical was almost indecipherable, the pen pressed so hard as to leave a small tear in the corner of the page.

MaMa had a baby.

He has no name.

MaMa allways bleeds when she feeds him.

*Pappa is allways crying.
The baby is allways watching.
Watching.
I can feel his eyes.*

Arthur felt his throat constrict and though he did not look upon the painting he saw the goat-child clear in his mind's eye, its gaze intense upon him, a grotesque half-smile upon its lipless face. The final entry was written with such speed that Arthur had to read it twice through to understand the gist.

MaMa and Pappa are gone. It took them. i woke up and they were gone and it sed I am alone. The peeple in town are curius about us, MaMa sed so once when she used to talk to me. They are grown ups too. They will no what to do.

The creature, whatever foul thing had come into the lives of these innocent people, had taken Tabitha's parents and left her alone, crippled from the poorly healed burns on her leg, and the only help she could think to bring was the townsfolk, people whom she had never met and from whom she had been separated for reasons that either pertained to Tabitha's sickness or her parent's reclusive nature. It was brave of her to deny the evil that inhabited the house, though truly a final desperate act that the records Arthur studied before arriving here had shown did not work and had cost many more lives. Arthur turned the pages again, one by one towards the back of the diary, hoping for more, seeking some information about the horrors that Tabitha had seen and that he, too, was now facing, but when he reached the end of the diary that was still a quarter blank, he found but two more words written in dark red upon the final page.

Arthur. RUN.

He dropped the book as though it burned him, cast his eyes to the left and right, and threw himself to the side, cracking his skull hard upon the couch, just as the chandelier above him crashed to the carpet. It was not large, but made of twisted metal with many sharp edges and he knew that the fixture could easily have slashed his neck, pierced his brain, ended his life. Arthur

knew he had escaped a worse fate though the pain in his head throbbed terribly.

He then noticed both doors leading away from the room were again closed. He chose the one that led to the entrance hall and the stairs, stepping over the chandelier with great caution. As he opened the door, a fear filled his mind that the knob would refuse to turn.

He felt little surprise to see that it led to the kitchen once more.

He left the door open wide and pressed the diary into the crack near the floor to keep it so, and then walked across the room to open the second door.

It too led to the kitchen.

When he turned back, hoping to shock his mind from these hallucinations by seeing two opposite doors lead to the same place and knowing it was impossible. He then found the second door was closed. He had not heard it close, and the diary which he had wedged beneath it was now open to two previously blank pages.

Baphomet, Baphomet, Baphomet the pages cried, filled with the name again and again in jagged letters and Arthur dropped to his knees in defeat.

He was no scholar of demons, no seer of the dead. He had spent his life bringing order to the chaos that people saw within their minds and walls. Yet he found his resolve wavering. These were no mere hallucinations, no sickness of thought brought on by stress or imagination. There was something evil within the house and *it knew he was here*.

He walked back to the door that should lead to the entrance and opened it upon an empty room. The room was dark, smelling foul with decay, but he gladly entered to be away from the kitchen, the diary and the infernal painting.

The door closed behind him of its own accord and he cursed himself for being so startled since, of all he had seen that night, this was the least alarming. When he tried the handle, tentatively, the door was stuck fast, locked or held closed by the forces in the house. But he knew it would only have led only back to the room with the portrait and he would not have gone through.

He crept across the room to the door on the opposite side and feared nothing more than finding that it, too, was closed to him and he would be doomed to die here, alone in the dark. The door opened smoothly but instead of the kitchen, or the entrance hall, or even the threshold of the

previous room it opened right into the middle, suspended in the air with no wall to hold it, facing the painting directly, the demon's sneering face just inches from his own. He screamed in spite of his internal admonishments as he noticed one small, hairy claw was now poking from beneath the baby's swaddling as though reaching for him.

He slammed the door and turned, sank down to sit with his head rested back against the smooth wood, visions dancing behind closed eyes.

"The time for fear is past, Arthur," he spoke to himself in a bid to calm his turbulent thoughts. "There is no doubt that this is no illness of your mind. This...*baby*...is *watching*, *toying* with you, but it is no baby now."

He breathed deeply, inhaling the musty smell, and felt the old floorboards ragged with splinters under his fingertips. He knew not how long he sat this way, connecting himself with this building and trying to bring some calm to his heart, but in a sudden moment the scent of the room changed.

It was subtle, as the smell of recent rain or the perfume of a woman who has not long departed, but it was unmistakably real. Blood, that was the smell, but not such as to bring fear, just the suggestion of it caressing his nostrils and bidding him open his eyes. There she stood. The girl from the painting, the girl upon the stairs, but whole and unspoiled by the injuries he had seen in his last vision of her. She was still clothed in a white nightgown and it was still marred by old blood but she herself was beautiful, no older than ten and she held her hands towards him.

"I have read your diary. Your name is Tabitha."

The apparition smiled, weakly, as though afraid such emotion would invoke the presence of that which she spoke about in her recollections.

Arthur stood and looked into her pale, haunted eyes. It was clear she would not be able to speak to him, but her presence detracted from the rising panic even as her image wavered in and out between this sweet child and the haunting apparition he had seen upon the stairs, as though the act of maintaining a pleasant form drained her of whatever energy such creatures existed on.

Arthur approached her, terror still active enough within his mind for caution, but somehow dulled as though he had taken whiskey with his tea that evening. "You saved my life by warning me of the chandelier. I am in your debt."

He resisted the urge to reach out his hand and touch her, not knowing whether it would somehow be considered an insult if his hand were to pass right though as many say happens with ghosts. He had spent his life denying the existence of such things, a life he now felt almost wasted, yet his years of listening to the half-crazed ramblings of clients was the only help he had now when it came to understanding how to interact with this girl.

“It was brave of you,” Arthur said, wanting to do what he could to soften the pain of her tormented afterlife. “Inviting the townsfolk to help, even though you knew the baby was watching you.”

It was then that Arthur discovered a wondrous thing; ghosts could cry. The tears welled up in her eyes (or eye, singular, upon the occasional transformations back to her hideous true self) and he understood that she must place blame upon herself for their deaths, though in truth she did what any other person, man, woman or child would have done in the same situation. He let her weep for a few moments, standing above her as though he could somehow protect her, though he knew she was beyond help.

“So what are we to do now?”

He asked this as a question instead of a vague wondering as her presence assured him she had come to help. She had led him away from the never-ending circle of rooms that had led always back to the painting and, as such, he wondered whether her power rivalled that of the demon itself.

As she moved her form past his, a prickling chill invading his right side. She waved a hand at the door behind him and it swung open. Arthur made a choked sound as he saw the staircase that led down, down into the darkness with the smell of death wafting up from below.

“You intend me to confront this creature?”

She nodded and pointed one thin hand towards the stairs.

“Child...” Arthur said with a crack in his voice, “I cannot. I have not the skills, the knowledge. Lead me away from this place, back to my own world outside. I can bring others, tell them of what I have seen here so that all are prepared to face this menace.”

The child lowered her pointing hand and seemed to consider his proposal, eyes scrutinising him with a tired determination. She then shook her head, and her finger lifted to resume pointing the direction in which he should go. Arthur understood. The girl did not believe him, and was too frightened of remaining in this dreadful purgatory to allow him to leave. He

could plead with her for his life, beg her to save him, but he was at her mercy and from the look in her eyes, she would not be swayed from this course. She had saved his life from the falling chandelier and now expected him to return the gesture. The thought of this child, ghost or no, left to suffer here alone was abhorrent.

“I will likely die, and then we two shall wander these halls together.”

He made it as a joke, part of his mind still refusing to believe that which he saw happening, and the child made no expression to indicate what thoughts she had on the matter. For all her years of wandering these rooms, she was still but a child and she had made a decision which she would not relent. In her eyes he was a man, strong, infallible, and if anyone had a chance of destroying the evil within the house, it was he. He wanted to cite that seventy adults more capable than he who had come here and failed to do the same, but he could not bring himself to remind her of that again. The smell from below came stronger as he moved to stand upon the first step of the staircase and he mentally bid goodbye to his life as he began his descent, the child glowing in the darkness behind him.

The stairs led deep into the earth, past the level of what would have been a basement, and when they finally reached the bottom. Arthur's feet crunched on a floor of old bones that finally gave rest to the speculations upon the fate of those who had never returned from the house a century ago. He tried not to look about as he walked, the skeletons mostly dust as though his were not the first feet to pass by, yet for all his care, the light the girl cast was sometimes enough to illuminate half of a skull, the reaching fingers of a hand.

At the end of the corridor of bones through which they came, a door stood, split down the middle and taller than he could see with his limited vision. The girl nodded and he pushed the door apart, striding through with what he hoped looked to be purpose, instead of the panic and palpitations which he felt. As he entered the room, pitch dark, the only indication of its size was the sound of echoes that reached far from his footfalls and after a few steps he looked again to the child for direction.

She pointed straight ahead, and he moved, one halting step at a time, until he could feel that he stood close to the middle of the chamber. Sudden light blinded him, the images of a hundred candles placed around the walls of the room etched into his eyes. The darkness had been frightful, yet closing his eyes to that which he was doomed to see was worse and he

opened them wide though it pained him. The chamber was indeed grand, and he stood just a handful of strides away from the centre where a table sat, small and round, the only feature in an otherwise empty room.

But not truly empty, no, for there upon the table sat a bundle of dirty cloth which Arthur discerned to be the swaddling clothes in which the demon had been wrapped in the dread painting. Arthur turned to the girl again, but she was gone, vanished. Arthur could only assume that she was too afraid to stay and envied that she did not have to. The smell in the room was oppressive and Arthur had to still his urge to run as he knew that he was trapped here without the child to guide him and protect him from the demonic tricks. At such a loss, he was left with no other ideas than a panicked flight back to the stairs, which would likely not end well, or to walk forward and view the cloth which had, it seemed, been left here for him. It was unremarkable, the kind of cloth that many a mother has wrapped a child in throughout history, yet it was not a child that had been comforted in their bonds. As he lifted the rags from the table he felt the feeling that has dominated him within the room with the painting, the sensation of eyes, and malice, the feeling of being watched. Judged. Mocked.

Greetings, Arthur Kingsley of London.

The voice was deep, yet it pierced Arthur's ears as painfully as a high whistle and he dropped the cloth to the table and took a few steps back, hands upon his face in shock. There was silence again, yet from the corner of his eyes Arthur could see the creature's shadow stretching across the hard surface of the chamber floor. It had come.

He steeled himself and looked up. The demon stood some way past the table, as tall as Arthur and another man combined. Its eyes were black pits, interrupted by neither iris nor whites, and the horns that stood grandly from its head curled to the sides and looked too heavy to be supported by such a flimsy neck. The goat-face was clearly defined, its body verging upon thinness, the arms capped with monstrous claws and the legs ending in hooves that should have clacked on the ground but made no sound. It did not speak in words, its mouth remaining still, but Arthur had heard it force its words directly into his mind through some foul magic.

He did not know how to answer its acknowledgement, so he stood still, silent, and waited for the creature to continue. It did not, simply stood and watched him in return with its sneering face, though that seemed to be

the way of it and not some intentional expression. Long seconds played out in this manner, and when Arthur finally felt ready to speak, though he knew not what words would form when he tried, he felt a breeze on his back and turned to see Tabitha standing there, appearance more mutilated and grotesque than he had seen from her in their precious encounters.

“Baphomet.”

Arthur started as the girl spoke the first words he had heard from her. Her voice was strong, strangely so for one so young but she must have roamed these halls for a century or more and while her form did not age, her mind had surely grown wiser with the years and endless suffering. A child she would always be, but one with a great inner strength.

She walked towards the table with her head held high, eyes never wavering from the demon, and came to stand next to Arthur, the cold of her ethereal being caressing the flesh of his left arm.

He said nothing and waited for the exchange to play out and perhaps glean some information from the child as to what he was supposed to do, how to defeat this creature. The demon hissed and stepped forward on one thin leg, the movements jerky and strange.

You have done well, child.

The words pierced into Arthur's breast and he struggled to process them through an already confused mind. Tabitha looked at Arthur with another unreadable expression and walked past him to stand before the demon as a mouse before a hurricane.

“I want to see them.” The child sounded plaintive, any trace of determination gone from her voice and the demon snickered and moved his head in such a way as to simulate a shake.

He is not enough. I need more.

“You promised!” All trace of wisdom was gone and, though she was transparent, grotesque, here before this demon she was naught but a scared babe again. Arthur could see her tiny hands reach out to tug him, protesting, but they never made the journey full as she seemed wise enough yet to know that touching a demon was folly.

Begone.

The demon waved a hand and the apparition vanished, her face still pleading and streaked with invisible tears. Arthur realised he had been led here, a sacrifice, but he brought his eyes up to the demon's with shock all the same, as though he refused to believe it. The demon reached out a gnarled hand and suddenly Arthur felt an agony so intense suffuse his being that in the snatches of coherent thought he managed through the pain he wondered nothing more than how it was possible he had not lapsed into unconsciousness, though in his rational mind he knew it was a component of this terrible magic, that his pain and writhing and frothing at the mouth, the small trickles of blood that escaped his ears were all necessary for whatever ritual was being performed, that his screams somehow fed the demonic creature and made it strong.

Suddenly the pull was gone and Arthur collapsed to the ground like a puppet. When the pain finally subsided, not completely, but enough to allow for thought again, Arthur pushed himself into a sitting position and looked into the large, soulless eyes.

“Not so innocent, that girl,” he spoke through gasps. “Not so innocent at all. You hold the souls of her parents.”

I shall never fail to be intrigued by the myriad of trivial things that mortals will give up everything for. A soul in exchange for the life of a sick child.

“I had made that guess myself, demon.”

Ah, you speak that word as though it were an insult, a curse, though I feel much the same upon calling you by your title, mortal. I took the soul of the mother and fed from her essence, and when the child burned herself I took the soul of the father, and insisted I be paid directly. Draining a mortal spirit is pleasant, but holding a willing relinquished soul is bliss. I hold them now, very tightly, and they suffer a fate worse than the child could ever have dreamed in her life or that which came beyond.

“So what happened to Tabitha?”

A mere accident. She tried to butcher one of the creatures in the yard for food, but she slipped and impaled herself through the eye. It was not my doing, yet she made the choice to delay her ascension, and came to me to bargain for the release of her parents.

“And you agreed?”

Come mortal, I am not such a monster as you would believe. All I wanted, as any creature would want, is freedom. Arthur closed his eyes and looked to the ground as he began to understand what had taken place.

“You made her bring the townspeople here. To feed upon them. But how is that even possible?”

She has chosen to stay on this plane of her own free will, and that comes with certain...benefits. She is what your kin might call a poltergeist, with a limited ability to affect this world. She brought them to me but she did not know how to use what she has been given, still new to her form. I requested seventy souls and that many she brought me, but some escaped, I was not strong enough to hold them all, and I tasked her with replacing them. She was too tired to ensnare those who came looking for the lost ones, and then none came to this place through fear, until you, and she made use of what she had learned in the intervening years of solitude and I waited, and waited more.

“The shifting rooms. The painting. The entries in that diary. They were all illusions designed to bring me to pity. Even the chandelier, so that she might appear to save my life so I should agree to save hers and come here to you. What if I had simply refused?”

Her power is limited. Either the illusions would have faded and you would have found your escape, or she would have held to them long enough that you would have died, lacking nourishment, but none would benefit as without you agreeing to come to me, I could not have taken you.

“So none of this was created by you. It is she who holds the power. You have none.”

Ah, the mortal sees, at last. My reach is short, my power yet thin, but here in this room you are as helpless in my grasp as you were upon the surface in hers. And now I grow tired of talking. Your essence will nourish me and my reach will extend. When the child has brought me the rest of the mortals she promised, then I will have my freedom. Arthur began to weep as he understood that he faced the end of his life and found himself not cursing, but pitying, the child who would put the lives of her parents ahead of those of seventy innocent strangers. This demon could bring ruin to the world, yet Arthur held to the hope that when he failed to return, Lowell would alert the town, demolish the building in spite of their fears if only to be rid of it. There was only one question left that he felt he needed to ask.

“If she keeps to your terms, if she brings you the final mortal souls...will you let her parents go?”

He heard the demon laugh, softly, deep inside his head but he received no answer.

* * *

Mr. Lowell stood timidly upon the threshold of the grand house and called Arthur's name with a wavering voice.

It was many hours since Arthur should have vacated the property and given his report, yet there was no sign of the man, no stack of valuables taken from empty bedrooms and left at the entrance, no sounds from inside save the ever present creaks and groans from the wind, or so the investigator had claimed. The night was drawing in and Lowell had gathered a small group from the town, all of whom claimed that the tragedy of the house, which had happened long before their births, was naught but a ghost story concocted to add some mystique to their quiet hamlet, though none of them had come with Lowell for free.

He shook his head in a bid to clear his thoughts and took a few steps into the building, the men behind him walking as cautiously as he and wielding every manner of weapon that had been able to find, from daggers to kitchen pans. They approached the stairs, every noisome floorboard causing a collective shudder from the group, and when they had gathered beneath the staircase, the door of the house slammed shut. Two men ran back, not heeding Lowell's protests that it was the wind upon an old door, yet even he felt fear begin to stir when neither man was able to wrest the door open again. Several of the townsfolk began to sniff, unwilling to let tears fall but at the verge of having that choice taken from them. As the two men by the door began trying, and failing, to smash the windows, the last of the light from outside faded as the sun was swallowed in darkness and only their few lanterns gave illumination.

“The man brought supplies of tea, there should be evidence of him in the kitchen.”

Lowell's voice sounded bold even to himself and he tried to find pride in his composure as many of the men begged to come back during the day, or send in a force of men better trained than themselves.

Half the company cursed at Lowell and stayed in the entrance, working on the door, as the rest walked through empty rooms until they came unmolested to the intended part of the house and marked the cold fireplace before noticing a tea cup sat, empty but recently used, upon the table.

Lowell called Arthur's name again, and some of the townsfolk whispered it as though afraid of raising their voices but no answer came, and when the men turned to leave, two began to vomit upon the kitchen floor at the sight of a room that they had not passed through on the way here, but which stood in the same place.

Lowell took charge again and walked in, hands trembling.

He noticed a closed door on the other side of the mysterious room, a couch, and interestingly, a painting of the strange old family hanging over the fireplace. A few men accompanied him into the room, while most stayed back, afraid to enter a place that they insisted could not be there.

The door swung suddenly shut, and those in the room heard the screaming of the others, a sound that ceased abruptly and caused all but Lowell to drop and destroy their lanterns in a panic. Now, with naught but a single flame to guide them, they huddled by Lowell and insisted he try the door on the other side.

As he made his way across the room, however, he was stopped in his tracks at the sight of a small diary lying open upon the floor.

He leaned closer and held the flame out to read the two words that lay written upon the pages on view, and his own lantern smashed upon the ground when he read them.

LOWELL. RUN.

OLD MAN URIAH

Marietta Miles

Deep in the Appalachian Mountains an ugly man named Uriah Johnson made his living trapping animals. After months of hunting, baiting and reaping, Uriah would drive his loaded Chevy through the gaps and hollers, selling his pelts in back water towns. He skinned bears, bobcats, beavers, mountain lions, wolves and coyotes. Uriah made a fine living. A single man, he lived in a two room shed built by his great great grandfather. There was only one window, it was small and set up high allowing for only a crack of light. His rooms were dark, dingy and crowded with dead things. There was a small table with one stool, a rocking chair his grandfather cut and his small, itchy bed roll. Three miles of thick briars, oak, holly and pine separated Uriah's house and the nearest neighbor. Uriah was an island. And so Uriah began searching for a wife.

In the great hills Uriah was known for his cruelty, at times not waiting for death to pull pelts. Being smart, most fathers in town and along the rolling roads did not wish to give him their daughters. Therefore, one grey and rainy day Uriah stacked his truck with furs as if to sell at market. He drove through Fancy Gap, Pink Bed Holler and Hanging Dog, arriving in the town of Turnip. He met a family with six children. They lived in a shack underneath the shadow of a wild and black mountain. Uriah leaned hard and stood tough, talking the slow witted father into the ground. In the end he gave the family one bear pelt, one wolf pelt and one deer pelt in exchange for their oldest daughter.

Evelyn Jean was bony with dark hair and big gray eyes. She cried quietly in the corner of the old man's truck all the way to his isolated house. Between gasps and sobs she looked toward Uriah, staring at his shriveled hands and yellow finger nails.

Uriah Johnson, like every Johnson man before him, wanted and expected sons. Daughters were of no use for a mountain man. Daughters couldn't bring down a grown black bear. Daughters couldn't skin and gut a white tail. Daughters couldn't drive the narrow back roads of the Appalachians, selling the skins. Uriah knew, with no doubt, he would make a boy child. He was so sure that Evelyn would give him a son he was whispering the boy's name in his sleep, "Uriah Jr., Uriah..."

After weeks of forced attempts, Uriah knew his new wife was with child. And so, being a practical man, he raised his hand to her less often and when he did hit he was mindful of her belly. Uriah watched the girl grow large and began to get greedy and impatient, waiting on a boy to prove his own worth.

Soon, with little else to do but wait, Uriah began to fashion a teddy bear for his child. His grandfather had made a bear for his son and Uriah's father made one for him. So he took the pelt from a black bear killed in November and stuffed it with wood shavings from the new curing rack built only a few weeks before. He hemmed the feet with leather paddings from the paws. He sewed the long, pointed claws of the dead bear onto the toy. Big black buttons made the eyes. Uriah stitched the ears too far back on the large round head and tufts of fur near the eyes made the stuffed animal look as though it were scowling. The mouth had been crafted with red ribbon from Evelyn's winter coat. It looked like a bloody, open wound. Although Evelyn was compliant and dutiful she could never stay too near the bear for it filled her head with nightmares.

When Evelyn's time came, Uriah locked her in the messy, cold bedroom, making her labor in the dark, all alone. She screamed like an animal, promising to do his will if he would just put her down. She begged for help and scratched at the door, her finger nails breaking in the wood. Uriah, growing intolerant of her moaning, grabbed the monstrous teddy bear. He quickly opened the door and threw the death toy into the room. The bear slid across the floor. The black claws were too big for the small bear and in the shadows it looked like a troll. The bear stared at her. While she held herself, waiting for the waves of pain to cease, Evelyn imagined she saw the bear take a breath. Another arc of agony poured over her and poor Evelyn lost her senses, she thought she was splitting in two. Finally, after thirteen hours she held the baby in her arms and to her chest. She pulled herself along the floor and leaned against the wall. Uriah pushed open the door.

"Let me see him," Uriah sounded like he had coal in his throat. "Gimme my boy."

Evelyn pulled the infant closer to her chest and turned away from Uriah. When it was plain that she would not give him the baby he pushed her shoulder hard and grunted in her ear. He clawed at the blood dampened

blanket. Fingers shaking he pulled back the swaddling. Evelyn was whimpering, she stuttered and sputtered, afraid of what Uriah would say.

“I could call her Rose.” Big tears rolled down Evelyn’s pink cheeks. Her shoulders trembled and she was trying to speak. Uriah hung his head and turned toward the door. The baby girl mewled like a kitten, rooting for her mother. As Uriah walked out of the bedroom he locked the door behind him. “Please leave her to me,” Evelyn screamed at him. “Please,” she cried and knocked at the wood, the remains of labor still on her skin and gown. Evelyn was too weak to stand. Uriah left the shack with their baby in his hands. He walked to a burning pile, surrounded by a clearing. This is where the bones of Uriah’s kills became ash.

Uriah came home alone, muck on his boots and whisky on his breath, to find young Evelyn dead. Whether she bled too much from the tearing of birth or she took her own life Uriah did not know. The town’s folk knew he had married and he needed to remain respectable, so in the morning he called for the box maker to fit her. Evelyn was put in a small pine coffin with no pillow or cushion for show. Because he had a pitch black heart, Uriah did not give her a flower to hold but tossed the toy bear onto Evelyn’s breathless chest. The bear haunted her in life, tormented during her labor and now lay next to her in death. Uriah was, at last, done with Evelyn Jean.

Three nights after Evelyn was put deep in the ground, Uriah’s house was quiet. The purple night was giving way to the gray of morning and the full moon slipped across the sky. Uriah had wisely made his bed in the front room so he could sleep close to the fire. Before turning in he made sure to shut the front door tight and lay muffs at the bottom to keep out the November wind.

And yet it was the painful cold that was waking old Uriah. His feet and hands were nearly numb and he could see his breath hang in the air. He did not want to move for already the icy knives of cold were stabbing at him. The blue morning was breaking through his open front door, the door he had closed and covered so well the night before. Near the dying fire, the rocking chair his great grandfather had fashioned rolled forward and backward ever so slightly. In the chair, hair matted with ice and claws tipped in mud, curled the buttoned eyed bear he buried with sweet Evelyn Jean.

Uriah’s mouth dropped open and he felt a warm stream run down his leg. A frigid, skinny hand reached from behind him and cut off his frozen

cries.

THE STONE CLOCK

Gene Stewart

Alexander Baynes Colton IV sat in the creaky leather chair facing the bay window. The chair was older than him and made more noise these days. It creaked with his every breath. Right now those breaths came harsh and deep and fast.

He was scared. The lawn, dark beyond the mullioned glass, dark beyond the clear pane in the center, showed nothing frightful. Not yet, he thought, as a bead of sweat made a break from his hairline to the cover of his left eyebrow.

Blinking, he concentrated again on tying his right hand down. That was the hardest part. It could not be his left hand. Only his right would do.

Behind him, the stone clock ticked smugly. Tick, it seemed to say, and then, of course, tock. Naturally. One followed the other. No escaping that. An order must be preserved. It ran deeper than the grain in the stone the clock was made from.

He knew the clock had been made by his great-great-grandfather, the notorious Alchemist. He'd used primitive tools and had taken many years to complete it. A sculptor, he'd worked the stone perfectly. It was the only known grandfather clock made of a single piece of stone, its inner workings carved, it was said, from the chips off the original block. Same with the pendulum and the decorative flakes studding its face and sides.

It resembled a cello without a neck. Its face, hexagonal, featured a blindingly shark-sharp spike of stone at eye level. It was the axis around which the hands moved.

Everything about it was stone, from the fist-shaped counterweights to the toe-shaped feet.

Like a squat old man, the stone clock told time and listened to no one.

Only its chain was metal. Even that had a family story, Colton knew. Supposedly it had bound his great-great-grandmother when she'd been taken, as a woman of 17 years, by a raiding party led by his great-great-grandfather. Kidnapped, she had quickly developed what today is called Stockholm Syndrome and the rest was history. He married her, fathered children on her and owned her as proudly as any of his many other possessions.

Things were different back then, he thought.

His right hand, tied with copper wire to a wooden breadboard, was cold now. The cincture cut off blood flow. It looked white and trembled. There was a faint blue cast to its mottled, old-man's skin.

He had nailed the board to the top of the old desk. Other nail holes showed he was not the first to have done this.

Grimacing, he struggled but could not move his hand.

Behind him, the clock chimed midnight in its cool, slithery stone voice. Its bell was carved of the same stone and wasn't meant to announce time to a house or even a big room, so its quiet, faintly hissing sound sufficed.

Colton's brow broke more sweat. When he inhaled, it shook, as if his lungs were afraid.

He had one minute, he knew. One minute out of a lifetime, a minute he'd prepared for over the years. Braced, he reminded himself that not doing this would break the line of blood sacrifice and destroy the family fortunes.

Oh gods, where *was* the boy?

"In," he called.

His nephew entered, all of 23 and wide-eyed from excitement and curiosity. "What's the big secret, Grandpa?" He was fiddling with the crowbar he'd been told to fetch. And then he saw his grandfather's hand tied down and stopped talking.

The crowbar fell to the floor with a metallic thud.

"The axe." Colton gestured with his free hand to the implement propped by the desk. "Quickly, pick it up."

"It's tonight? Oh, hell, you've got to be kid--"

"We don't have *time!*"

The boy was pale now, and his movements wary as he lifted the axe. It was old, also made of stone, with a wooden handle burnished a bronze-black by time's patience.

"Hurry, we don't have time to wait. It's coming." The boy approached, beseeching with his gaping eyes. All those stories, proving true? "Are you sure, Gran--"

"Now!"

The old man turned his face away and injected the clear solution from a syringe into his right biceps with his free hand.

As he did this the boy closed his eyes and, as trained in so many games, swung the axe down, hard, grunting with the effort.

He would have missed if the axe had not been so wide.

Instantly a wild shrieking, like animals caught in traps being lowered into boiling water, burst from the dark lawn. The sound penetrated the old window and cracked the new, clear pane of glass. The mullions seemed to spin, spirals of a light that did not illuminate.

His grandson screamed and dropped the axe. It clattered to the floor to the right of the desk. He gaped at it. He was crying now, and ran from the room, slamming shut the door.

“No, wait.” Colton had felt the thump as the axe had bitten into his arm. He’d even heard the snap of his bones breaking, just before he’d heard the thump.

He glanced at his wrist; no hand. Blood trickled. Waves of pain warmed and numbed by the morphine kept pulsing through him, as if a sun had developed a heartbeat. He could ignore them, though. They seemed far away, somehow.

On shaking legs he struggled to stand, ignoring the shrieking, which had now become the battering of hundreds of leathery wings at the window. Darkness seemed to have condensed into famished bats or vultures.

He had to hurry. He had to spike his now separated right hand onto the clock face in a dark, bloody parody of the hands of time. But the hand was not on the desk.

Had it bounced off?

“Oh gods, no.” Colton looked at the floor; the Turkish rug was stained now. Even as he looked, the stains were being absorbed, the carpet’s threadbare appearance returning to normal.

“Where is it?”

He could hardly move, his forearm still being tied to the desk. He leaned as far left as he could, peering around the edge of the desk.

There it was, his hand, quivering and partly clenching as it lay palm up in the waste basket. Irony, he wondered?

He could not reach the damned basket. Sliding the chair’s protesting casters as far left as he dared, he tried to reach with his left leg. He wished he’d thought to have a crowbar ready so he could prize up the board and free his arm. Instead he’d sent his grandson for one at the last moment, and the boy had panicked and had dropped it out of his reach.

At the window a chaos of insanity stormed to be let in.

As he strained, the chair slipped out from under him. It rolled backwards across the study and bumped the stone clock, which ticked smugly, as always.

Was it ticking faster, somehow?

Dangling from the desk by one arm, bleeding now that the cincture had begun to loosen, Colton felt lightheaded and sick in his stomach. His grandson had run; he called for him but got no answer. The boy was probably cowering in his room by now with that girlfriend of his.

Beasts outside craved his flesh, his bones, his soul. They clamored to eat him, to swallow him whole forever in an endless fall of bad luck, curses and evil. Killing him would claim for them the whole family, until the line gave out. This was about staving off extinction, he knew.

Colton's knees hurt. The floor under the carpet was hardwood, with wide boards from the times when trees actually grew huge. He scrabbled and tried to reach the basket, then realized it stood three quarters on the edge of the Turkish carpet.

He pulled at the carpet, as slowly as he could force himself to do it. Once nearly toppling over, the waste basket slid closer, closer.

His hand trembled as it reached for his other hand.

It felt heavier than he'd imagined.

Glancing over his shoulder, he saw that he could not reach the stone clock. It was too far away, against the wall opposite the window. Holding his own detached hand, becoming more faint by the moment, his ears battered by the importunate madness just outside the room, he called once again for the boy.

No answer.

He tried to think, the noise from outside a demonic distraction. There, a lamp. Yes.

He grabbed the Tiffany lamp from the desk and pulled the cord, hard, to unplug it. With this, he thought, maybe I can...

After several tries, Colton managed to snag the stone clock's face. The cord had come down behind one of the clock's hands; he prayed it was strong enough and that the plug's two-pronged end wouldn't slip.

Tugging as hard as he could, he tipped the clock. It rocked and struck the wall with a room-shaking slam.

At once the creatures outside hushed, but only for an instant. They then renewed their cries all the stronger.

Further cracks appeared in the clear pane, which now showed parts of shattered faces, broken fangs, torn claws. So much damage wanted in, so much entropy; a family history's worth.

The clock rocked forward again, overbalancing this time.

Dropping the cord, Colton had only enough time to grab his cut-off hand and hold it palm up. Hanging from the desk, he aimed as best he could from his awkward position and slapped the hand onto the clock face's spike as it came down.

The whole house shook with the clock's weight hitting floorboards laid three hundred years ago.

Colton gasped. Instant silence deafened him as he lay pinned, both arms now useless. One lay crushed under the clock. The other, still wired to the board that was nailed to the huge oak desk, was torn from its socket. Only flesh held it onto his torso now. He realized that there was pain morphine could not contain or dampen. He took up the tortured screaming as if accepting a torch of sound from outside the room.

His grandson found him a few moments later. "Grandpa." Kneeling, he grunted, trying to lift the clock.

"No."

The old man still lived. He whispered the proper things to say and reminded the boy of his lessons.

"Those old poems? The... spells?"

"Yes. Say them. Quickly."

The boy, thinking he was indulging an old man's dying whim, began reciting. To his credit, he managed to keep it up as the clock shuddered, pulling its spike from the floor. It stood, still shuddering, and moved itself back to stand in its accustomed place. It moved like a snail but it moved. Once there, its gears ground for a moment, as if fighting to move the hand now skewered on the spike in the center of its face. Then, with its soft stone whisper, it struck one.

They'd done it, Colton thought.

One minute had become one hour and once again all was well.

He lay happy and even smiling as the boy called an ambulance, knowing now there would be plenty of time to train his grandson in the arts of stonecutting and the mastery of chthonic earth forces.

To what the boy's father would teach, Colton would add lessons not written in any book.

Lessons that would one day bring the boy to a single minute of magick. That minute would appease the darker subterranean gods for another cycle, and he'd have time to train his son and grandson in turn.

"Did you hear them?"

"Outside? Yes, Grandpa. What were they?"

"Our creatures. If we can keep them."

"You mean those, those things work for us?"

"How do you think we find all that oil, all those minerals, when a thousand others fail?"

How else, Colton continued silently, is our family's fortune made and our family's will enforced, if not by those earth forces that gathered to try, as once a generation they must, to free themselves from our family's bondage?

But he said nothing. Not just then.

There would be plenty of time to teach, and to learn, Colton told himself, now that the stone clock had again struck one under their guiding hand.

Looking down at his ruined limbs, he vowed to teach the boy to take better precautions when the next star cycle came around.

WHEN OUR GRAVES ARE COLD

Dorothy Davies

When our graves are cold what do we do? What should we do? Lie still and shiver, causing the rotting flesh to fall even faster from our chilled bones or should we get up and dance around, get some friction going? Ah but then the rotting flesh would fall even faster, tangle around our bony feet and trip us up. What a sight that would be! Part skeletons a-dancing around the graveyard, dropping gobbets of flesh everywhere, falling cranium over tibia and landing with an undignified thump on the newly turned earth. Well, you know that soil takes a long time to settle itself after someone kicks it out of the earth's crust to make room for the coffin, then throws it all back in again in the hope it will level itself out after a few months. About the length of time it takes to install a lying gravestone, that is. Grass cutting is an ever-present need in a graveyard and graves that do not settle are liable to be skirted, leaving the swaying grass to nod toward the headstone and draw attention to the recent passing. Recent, that is, compared with the rest of them, the old ones, illegible through lichen and years of rain, snow, frost and neglect, through the slightly newer ones, not so much lichen, a little less rain, snow, frost but the same neglect..

The thoughts are bitter this night. As bitter as the frost which cuts deep into the fleshless bones and chills the satin of the coffin. As bitter as the tears which fell when the coffin was interred and as bitter as the words which were uttered across the coffin from those who sought only that which was left behind. Inheritance. Death and inheritance. Linked forever in the minds of those who remain, those whose beds are not as cold as the graves in which we lie, face up, staring at the lid, wondering what to do with the idle hours.

We have gone. We have relinquished all control over tax matters, bank problems, fuel prices and everything else that plagues the world. And yes, those ancient gravestones indicate people who feel the same. Tax matters, bank problems and fuel prices have dogged the country for centuries. Fuel? Animal feed, the animals themselves, the cost of transport, the cost of stagecoaches, you name it we have endured it, now no more. It is as much a relief as the ability to dance with bony clattering over the cold graves, no need for clothes, no need for food or drink or medication. Freedom! Of a kind.

We have gone but we remain. A memory, a leaf on the family tree, a line on the order of service, a tear when a favourite hymn or song is sung if we are fortunate. A fading figure in an old photograph. We have gone but, as with everything, a part remains. Even as the leaves fall and rot into the ground to provide sustenance for plants and the trees themselves, so we fell and our flesh rotted and went into the ground which enriches the growth in the graveyard, feeding the worms and burrowing things. They do not attack the bones. The bones are intact, left unattacked, to dance around the stones which lie tip-tumbled and faceless and wordless and sometimes lying and we would wish the truth had been told about us. That we were bold and adventurous, that we were lovers and procreators, that we were movers and shakers – instead of husband, father, grandfather, whatever. We know that. We know what we were, the world knows what we were, the world doesn't know what we did whilst becoming husband, father, grandfather and all the other words inscribed at cost by the chiselling whistling stonemason at his bench, tap tapping away at the stone which would, in time, be defaced by lichens, rain, frost, snow and indifference.

When the flesh is gone, when the rotting is through and the bones are clean and sharp as new blades, ah, then we can rise up and dance.

We ask the most common question of all when we dance, bones clacking and resonating across the cold stone, what do living people think we do when we are in our coffins? Do they think we sleep, rest, think, feel, sorrow?

The answer we give is that they do not think, because they do not want to think what we might be doing. Do not want to think that they might open their door one night after the sound of castanets is heard on the doorstep and find our grinning skeleton there, demanding entrance, do not want to think we have come to wreak vengeance for inheritances stolen, destroyed, unshared, do not want to think. We are dead. We are in our graves. There we are expected to stay, to be good corpses and allow the world to carry on its business without us.

But we get bored, us fleshless wind-clad people. We get bored and restless and, even if you had donated us a book or a paper, how long would that last in eternity?

And so we rise up with a clatter and shout of jubilation and dance the freedom dance across the unsettled graves, leaving footprints that are never seen, terrifying the wildlife that would otherwise venture into this memory

laden cold portion of land, until those creatures run and the unsettled graves become more settled.

And when the dawn reaches out to tug away the curtain of darkness, we return to our narrow homes and stare once more at the coffin lids so that we do not upset those who might, just might, come visiting with flowers and tears.

And who go home to warm beds and warm homes and do not wonder what we do when our graves are cold.

One day they just might find out.



SKULL ECHOES

Ken L. Jones

It all starts with a visit to the motherland of severed vocal cords
Where I use Jungian synchronicity to form beehives
As I am dominated like a pony while I try to sleep
In all that I can remember and then baring all
I take all this away unfocused
And possessed only of a chocolate remote control
While I eat the scraps that darken all newborns
Until night fall's fluids drain
And I split her like needles
And in the blinding light of our communication
I drift slowly to a bright laboratory
Where the smell of freshly killed meteor showers
Proves that anything can set me off
And force me to sing my icy song
Of winter while festering in the hours
That have groaned to a stop
As sparks of owl's cries leap out in all directions
Presenting to me the dead man's business card
Which howled and simmered like jungle tendrils
As it dragged me into the deep end where all that
Was once so intricately stitched snaps open
With such a popping splendor that I more than welcome it.

MORENA'S REVENGE

Lawrence Falcetano

With trembling hand, I put pen to paper, recalling the grisly events that have consigned me to the hangman. I fear, I dread, I torment, as I sit imprisoned within these walls awaiting my fate. A fate unjustly thrust upon me by misfortune. Of sympathy, I expect none. Of understanding, I can merely be hopeful. It is only justice, after I am gone, that I trust these words will deliver. Yet, there is no remorse for the deed; remorse infers guilt, of which I have none. You will see, I am the victim of the occurrence, not the villain.

I had lived with Elisabeth for several years since our marriage. She was a woman of exceptional beauty. I had treasured her from the moment I saw her and knew she was the woman with whom I wanted to spend my life. We married soon after college and lived comfortably in a large stone house, which I was fortunate enough to have inherited from my father's estate. The house was surrounded by acreage and situated within the green hills of the New England countryside. Elisabeth loved its quietude and quaintness and I looked forward to its solitude after a day's work. Although Elisabeth and I were childless, our love for each other grew with the years and our happiness grew with it... until the day Elisabeth received a telegram from Doctor Gordon.

The good doctor informed Elisabeth that her mother had been injured in a fall and should not be left unattended since she would be convalescing for some time, and—being a widow—had no one to care for her. Naturally, Elisabeth insisted her mother stay with us during her healing process. My relationship with my wife's mother had been a temperate one, with no inordinate emotions between us. Therefore, being the understanding husband I was, I immediately made arrangements to have Morena transported from her hospital bed to our home.

It was on that cursed day my living nightmare began. Soon after Morena's arrival, I felt a marked neglect from Elisabeth. She directed her attention to her mother's well being to the exclusion of everything, including me. In time, she began to neglect herself as well. The once golden sheen in her hair faded to a lusterless pallor, as did the vibrant color in her cheeks. When I implored her to see her way, she insisted her mother's health was paramount. My efforts to make her see what she was becoming

were futile. Resignedly, I let her have her way with the expectation that Morena would recover quickly and leave our home. But she did not. Although her condition improved to the point where she could walk about her room unassisted, Elisabeth insisted her mother remain with us until her recovery was complete. I relented.

Weeks passed and, to abate the tedium of her confinement, Elisabeth brought her mother a sewing kit to help pass her time. This included an abundance of various colored threads, different sized needles and a multitude of patterns from which to create a variety of stitching projects. Morena embraced her new pastime and quickly became proficient with needle and thread, even to the degree of making new pillow covers for the sitting room sofa.

As for me, my days were insufferable. I found no joy in returning home after work to the place I once cherished. Now, my nights were empty and lonely, while my wife spent her time in the second floor room attending to her mother's comforts.

As time passed, I took my own comfort from the liquor cabinet. I imbibed more than my share and enjoyed it without contrition; wine and whiskey helped me escape the surroundings into which I had been imprisoned. The libation allowed me to see Morena for what she truly was, an insidious old woman whose presence was the destruction of my marriage and my life. There *was* a crowd and what had begun as an annoyance grew to a loathing for her with each passing day. Morena developed a mutual disgust for me as well, unjustly blaming me for what her daughter had become, accusing me of neglecting my wife and my home and calling me an indolent drunkard.

In time there evolved a discernable change in my wife as well. Influenced by her mother, she had developed a misguided belief that I was responsible for our happy days being behind us. Oh the torment and heartache of being abandoned by the woman I loved!

Up to this point there had been only malicious bickering between Morena and I until one evening, as we were engaged in a violent shouting match, she stood in the doorway of her room, her face livid, promising vengeance for what she believed I had done to her daughter. "You'll pay for what you've done," she shouted, shaking a clenched fist. "I'll have my revenge!" I took the threat idly and thought no more about it. What had I to fear from a half crippled aging woman?

I began to spend more time away from home. Each evening, after work, I would visit *The Bird's Nest*, a local tavern where I sat alone and drank away my oppression for hours, returning home only after I was sure Elisabeth and her mother had retired for the night. In the morning, I would leave for work earlier than usual, to avoid their unwarranted bickering. In time, all communication between us ceased. For a long while, my days lingered on this way. My drinking became excessive and soon became a prevailing habit.

One evening, during the third week of my torment, after having stopped by *The Bird's Nest* for my usual aggregate of drink; I chanced upon my old friend, Jacob Corbett. Jacob had been a friend and college classmate whom I hadn't seen in years. We embraced at the joy of seeing each other again and took a table together. The evening passed over beer and whisky and the telling of small lies about our lives. At length, I invited him to my home. An evening of conversation and companionship would be a welcome pleasure for me.

We arrived shortly before midnight. Elisabeth and her mother were long asleep and the house was dark and quiet. At the sitting room table, I set up wine and cheese and we drank and ate while we told tall tales about our schooldays. As the night progressed, I suggested a game of Gin Rummy. Jacob agreed and I retrieved a deck of cards from the breakfront drawer and a fresh bottle of wine. We played and laughed for nearly an hour until Jacob suggested—to abate the monotony—that we place a small wager on the games. I agreed. As the night wore on, our drinking increased, as did our wagers. I had been losing steadily and our game became not a game of enjoyment but a struggle of wits for the large sum of money on the table between us. After more than a dozen hands, I believed I finally held a winning group of cards. When the time came, I cheerfully revealed my hand to my friend, or should I say my opponent? He looked surprised as he focused his glassy eyes on the cards spread before him and then at the large pile of cash beside them.

“At last,” I said, “it is my turn to collect.”

As I reached to gather my winnings, Jacob stood suddenly and pointed a shaky finger at me. “Cheat!” he shouted. “You have not won a single hand all night and suddenly, you claim the largest prize of all.”

I was at first taken aback by this accusation. Realizing my friend was heavily intoxicated, I endeavored to explain my winning as honest luck.

However, he was obstinate and waved his arms in anger.

“You have brought me here tonight to steal my money,” he said. “A clever ruse!”

“You are wrong, my friend,” I pleaded. “I have played the game fairly.”

When I approached him in an effort to calm his concerns, he pushed away from me in the direction of the fireplace. Upon placing my hand on his shoulder, he turned suddenly and grabbed the iron poker from the hearth and swung it in a wide arc in my direction. I was surprised by this turn of events and attributed his rage to the large amount of wine he had consumed. Nonetheless, his mission was to do me bodily harm and I had no option but to defend myself. I sidestepped the blow, but he raised the iron again, this time bringing it down like a hammer. I reached up and grabbed the iron and a struggle ensued. He fought like a madman, his eyes ablaze, his face writhing in contortions of indignation. When I secured the iron from his grasp, he charged me like a bull, knocking me against the mantel and bringing his sweaty hands up quickly around my neck. I struggled for air as he pressed his thumbs steadily into my throat. Gasping and choking, I managed to swing the poker against the side of his head. It landed with a *crack* and Jacob Corbet slid to the floor at my feet.

I paused to regain my breathing and then knelt beside him. The crimson discharge oozing from the wound in his skull caused me to grimace. His sightless eyes staring at the yellowed ceiling and the stillness of his body told me Jacob Corbet was dead.

I took my seat at the table and, with trembling hands, poured myself a glass of wine. In a matter of minutes, my life had gone from bad to worse. I was now accountable for a corpse, which was none of my design. The house was quiet. Elisabeth and Morena had, no doubt, slept through the commotion. I collected my thoughts and decided quickly that my best course of action was to dispose of the body. A police investigation would not prove favorable to me and upon learning of this encounter, Morena would delight in trying to convince the authorities I had deliberately committed murder.

I walked back to the corpse and lifted it over my shoulder. Struggling with the burden, I walked through the kitchen and opened the door to the cellar. Carefully, I descended the stone stairs into the darkness. At the bottom, I removed the lantern from the hook where it hung and lit it with a

match from my pocket. I made my way through the chilled dampness of a long corridor to the extreme of the cellar, passing neglected rooms that had been of no use to me other than to serve as a repository for a few pieces of old furniture and some rusted garden tools. I secured a spade and bow saw and continued to the smallest room at the most remote end of the corridor. I dropped the corpse to the earth floor and stood in the silence. There were no windows in the room and a narrow archway entrance kept it obscured from the rest of the cellar.

I placed the lantern on the ground and went to work digging a hole in the loose soil at the center of the floor. I worked until the hole was large enough to contain the remains and then took up the bow saw and knelt besides the corpse. In my cleverness to conceal the crime, I had determined I must not only hide the cadaver, but also dismember it. A dissected corpse would decay more quickly than the whole of its parts.

I began by sawing off the head first, looking away as Jacob Corbet watched me with vacant eyes. Then I sawed off the arms and finally the legs. Being careful not to get blood spattered, I kicked each member into the hole with my boot. When the torso alone remained, it became necessary to push this heaviest of the body parts over the edge with my hands. With a quick but strenuous effort, it landed at the bottom of the pit with a *thud*. My blood ran cold.

More than an hour passed and I hastened to make an end to my labor before the sun rose. As I began tossing shovelfuls of earth back into the hole, I was suddenly overcome with the peculiar feeling that I was not alone. Perhaps a feeling of guilt or remorse was playing tricks on me. I stopped and stood motionless, listening for any sounds from the corridor. I retrieved my lantern and scanned the darkness. My light shone through the archway and traveled over the stone and mortar walls, passing glistening webs as eight-legged creatures scrambled for the refuge of darkness. Seeing nothing untoward, I concluded it was a manifestation of my own mind, and returned to the task before me.

When at last, the void was filled; I loosened the top layer of soil to match the soil surrounding it. Satisfied that any recent disturbance of the area was undetectable, I returned the tools, replaced the lantern and climbed the stairs back to the upper floor to retire for the night.

After an uneasy sleep, I awoke the following morning as if from a bad dream. The burden of the previous night's event weighed heavily on my

mind. My head was aching and my body was weak. I bathed and dressed and thought a large breakfast might relieve my anxiety.

On my way to the kitchen, I found Elisabeth and her mother in the sitting room standing by the opened front door. Elisabeth carried an overnight bag.

"I am taking mother home," she said, "and will be staying with her indefinitely."

I was surprised and dismayed upon hearing this and stepped closer to her with pleading eyes.

"It is no use," she said, before I could utter word. "I can no longer live alone with you."

Morena spoke not a word, but the vengeance in her eyes burned through me like the fires of Hell, revealing more to me than any words she could speak. I could offer no dissent as they entered a cab and I watched it drive away.

I had finally been confronted by the fear I dreaded. Although Elisabeth held feelings of ill will toward me, my compassion for her was unyielding. She had become a misguided and confused wife, prejudiced by a sinister old woman. I could only hope this nightmare would soon end, and my good wife would return to me.

From that night forward, my only companion was the bottle. As I drank, thoughts of Jacob Corbet's withered remains below me swirled in my head. One night as I sat in a half stupor, I saw his decayed and bloated corpse appear at the table opposite me, pointing an accusing finger in my direction. Compelled by fear and anger, I hurled a full bottle of whisky at the horrific image and it vanished in an instant. It was as though his ghost had risen from the cellar to haunt me. I drank more in an effort to obliterate the specter.

Another week passed and I felt confident the crime would never be discovered. I had been drinking less and thinking more of how to bring my beloved wife home to me and return my marriage to its blissful state.

It was, however, on the following Saturday evening that I received a visit from the local authorities. In my doorway stood a young uniformed policeman and a well-dressed older detective. I allowed them entrance without trepidation.

"We are investigating the disappearance of one, Jacob Corbett," the detective said. "The barkeeper at *The Bird's Nest* identified you as a regular

and recalled you and Mr. Corbett drinking there last week. He remembered seeing the two of you leave together.”

“The barkeeper is correct,” I said. “We had come here for a nightcap and, after a short visit, my friend left for home. I haven’t seen him since.” My manner was convincing.

The detective thought for a moment and then continued. “There is a second matter, possibly related to the first,” he said. “Police headquarters has received a wire, stating there had been heard numerous quarrels from inside this house. The anonymous sender claimed the shouting had been of such magnitude, they believed someone’s life might be in peril.”

I laughed and assured him the only persons living with me were my wife and her half invalid mother and that they had been away and I’d been alone in the house for the past week. Here, he produced a warrant to search the premises. This I had not expected, but I cooperated fully, for what had I to fear?

I led them through the rooms on the main floor and guided them through the second floor bedrooms. They searched well, every closet and corner. When the time came, I advised them to be cautious on the stone stairs as we descended into the cellar. Feeling no anxiety, I removed the lantern from its hook and lighted their way, cordially. They searched like alley cats, every inch of every room and I was amused by their ineptness and gratified by my own cunning.

At length, we came to the small room at the end of the corridor. The policemen entered before me and I followed with the light. As I passed beneath the archway, the glaring rays of my light fell upon a vision of overwhelming horror. Had I gone mad? Had I been haunted by a specter of my own making? For a moment, my companions stood motionless, shocked and awed at the scene before them. Overcome by the ghastly presence, I fell back against the opposing wall, dropped the lantern and gave out a long shrill cry, for my fate had been sealed. The light from the lantern bounced along the stonewalls until it came to rest upon the corpse of Jacob Corbet, precariously seated in a far corner upon the earth floor. The rough stitching securing the head and limbs to the torso, and the contrast of black thread against sallow dead skin, revealed one certain conclusion—Morena had procured her revenge.

VICTIMS OF WAR

Dorothy Davies

Do you not think a train whistle is the loneliest sound in the world? When it echoes across the countryside at night, does it not tear at your heart? As the train leaves the station for places unknown to me, does the whistle not seem to ring with loneliness because you are being left behind?

Or is it just that I think so, because I am here on this station – because trains are my life?

‘Trains are more important now than ever, now that we are at war. Have you not seen them, the young men in khaki, hiding their fears behind gallows humour and stiff upper lip, when you know well they are not old enough to leave home, to face the guns, the foe in all their fierceness to push us out of Europe...

My problem is simple. I have a form of second sight. I see the men; I see the light around them. I can tell before they go who will come back missing a limb or even two, for those limbs have no light around them. I could go to them and say ‘don’t go, don’t go, for you will come home legless, armless or wounded in some terrible way.’ But they would laugh at me and get on the train anyway. I am no more than a foolish porter.

But the real nightmare I live with day after day is the ones I see with no heads, just a skull Oh yes, I see the ones who will not return and how sad, how heartbreaking sad is it to see them for are they not young and energetic and have much to give to this world?

How many are so shown to me? I cannot say. In a crowd there could be 3 or 4 of them, maybe more. I see the skulls; I turn away for I cannot bear the thought of the loss of the young men.

The draining of the country is how I see it. Those who would work, those who would labour, those who would teach, those who would lead, they are heading for the Front, that mystical ever moving ever dangerous and treacherous Front, where they will come face to face with the enemy, with gunfire, with barbed wire and with every fear there is known to man.

They will come home damaged in body and in mind.

So you see me, a porter here on this station, ushering the young men onto the trains, smart in their uniforms, casual in their humour, dying inside with fear and gut wrenching longing not to be there, they are busy with their

mask of indifference to their fate and I am someone they ignore completely. I wave my green flag, I blow my whistle; I send the train out of the station to the coast where they will board the ships that will take them into Hell and damnation. For they will return changed beyond belief, beyond recognition, except for those who wear the skulls, those who will end up under grass in a foreign land.

Those who boarded those trains are the lucky ones. Those who stayed behind suffered the agonies of being left behind.

I wanted to go. I thought I had to go.

But I looked in the mirror the day I was due to go to the recruiting office, I looked and I saw –

A skull.

And I could not go.

I stay here, with my cowardice. In my own hell.



THE VAMPIRE HUNTER'S REQUIEM

John X. Grey

The solitary old man stood on a partially-broken sidewalk, staring up at an angled three-story building that had seen better days situated along the edge of New Orleans' famous French Quarter. Its northwest wedge angle faced the corners of North Peters and Iberville Streets a few blocks from the mighty Mississippi River and Wolderberg Park, each window covered by nailed up planks from inside or horizontal Venetian blinds. There were wrought iron railings along the second-story balcony rusted or the paint peeling, a stone foundation and whitewashed walls also in need of cleaning or repainting. Jack Petrov saw flickering lights behind upper story windows to a loft room, the neighborhood otherwise generally darker than more vibrant scenes elsewhere on Halloween night, but his necessary work required shadows and concealment from the normal world. This retired private investigator and vampire hunter had come here to slay his wife.

Daphne and Peter would've insisted on accompanying me. This is something I must do alone. I don't want my daughter to see what Angelique has become since...

Adjusting his gray trench coat's lapels and pulling that old-fashioned gray fedora's brim lower over tired blue-gray eyes (having seen many horrors since discovering inherited vampire hunting instincts from his mother's father), the 6' 2" white-haired ex-policeman and private eye looked both ways, but found little vehicle traffic to this semi-deserted intersection and crossed toward the former bawdy house (built when Spain still ruled here). Fixated on the peeling white-painted front double doors with worn brass knobs and fixtures at the corner entrance under its faded green awning, Petrov never noticed two shadows half-a-block northwest on Iberville Street observing his entry into the dilapidated building.

Maybe I should have used the knocker outside to announce myself, the old man joked within as he forced the unlocked, humidity-swollen entrance with one hard shove, feeling the weapons carried beneath that coat for tonight's work, *they probably already know I'm here.*

An experienced vampire hunter of fifty years, Jack had brought a short-handled double-bladed battleaxe, the dozen rounded sharpened wooden stakes, a short-bladed sword, the Special Forces knife (gift from his

older son Frank, a disabled veteran), a chrome-plated .45-caliber 1911 Colt pistol, collapsible automatic hand crossbow and the silver crucifix on its neck chain hidden under his open-collar white dress shirt (he stopped any wearing ties six years earlier). Petrov had courage for this work ever since facing Cossack vampires in northern Russia when one US Army Corporal, but left this matter unfinished due to his broken marriage's nostalgia, letting second wife Angelique escape after destroying her master Uriah Ives in 1963.

Killing that 19th Century pimp and some of his cronies was easier than the woman I still loved. Do I finally have the guts to finish this business?

Brushing dust from gray slacks above scuffed black shoes as he moved through this whorehouse's former entrance parlor and creeping carefully toward the long, wide staircase leading to a second floor balcony, once grand furniture all around him covered by sheets, mirrors and paintings streaked in thick cobwebs, Petrov overheard celebration sounds above, realizing he might still have surprise. He ascended that staircase no longer caring about his fate.

The visitor took a left hallway toward an L-shaped intersection across rat-eaten, faded carpet, past broken gaslight fixtures on peeling dirty-papered walls and closed door rooms where this coven slept during daylight hours (and ladies of the evening satisfied their customers' desires decades earlier). He stared through blinds of one hallway window looking down on North Peters Street and glimpsed a young couple holding hands crossing toward that sidewalk below.

Packer assured me he was taking my daughter from the Hotel Monteleone out to dinner at Arnaud's tonight and maybe viewing Halloween festivities afterward. Still can't accept they do what old folks in my day called "shacking up." That could be them down there, but I can't tell in those shadows. Forget it. Remember why you're here – Angelique must be destroyed.

Turning right, Petrov saw a straight staircase leading up to his destination. He had come here and scouted the area earlier, after arriving in New Orleans with (surviving twin) daughter Daphne and her live-in boyfriend, New York journalist Peter Packer on a cross-country trip from Gotham, New Jersey briefly detoured while in Eastern Kentucky by an unexpected case.

The vampire hunter could have dispatched this entire evil brood of thirty-eight including their Mistress Angelique before sundown, but preferred to face them at the height of their power stimulating his aging body into almost superhuman vampire hunting action. He missed the thrill of slaughtering undead, having only one other hunt since facing an ancient master vampire who almost made Daphne his newest bride at Gotham University back in July 1967.

Reaching one landing to this building's third floor loft, Petrov heard the group playing some modern music on a record-turntable sound system and extra speakers – Iron Butterfly's "*In-a-godda-da-vida/In the Garden of Eden*" – and crept around old furniture, crates and boxes before glimpsing dancing figures at the attic's center and far end in costumes for Halloween.

Okey dokey, it's show time, Jack. Slay 'em in the aisles.

The hunter took his crossbow, surveying thirty-eight bloodsucker targets celebrating All Hallows Eve in the Big Easy like thousands within the French Quarter's other parts. Some were dancing together or alone while others watched. Tied or chained to the support pillars across this room's center were the half-dozen naked humans of various races from New Orleans' melting pot, gagged with handkerchiefs and scarves. Seated at the loft room's rear on an old prop velvet-upholstered throne decorated with real human skulls across its headrest and each armrest's end, and drinking (presumably blood) from a golden goblet, Angelique was dressed as Queen Marie Antoinette, complete with powdered wig and that golden-white hoop skirted ball gown sporting the plunging neckline, and silver slippers on white silk stockings. Her big blue eyes had lost their tired appearance Jack recalled from being a stay-at-home wife and mother (different after growing up in the relatively exciting world of one small Louisiana-based traveling circus).

She's pretty as on that day we met in '47, and just like the last time I saw her.

The eye wrinkles were replaced by radiant youth, and Petrov imagined the golden-brown curls beneath that wig had become freshly lustrous, since her particular curse of vampirism made its victim appear youthful forever. Jack noticed his wife lavishing attentions on costumed men dancing past their vampire mistress accepting kisses and tasting her cup, but just one stayed close by Angelique's left armrest, the curly-blond Afro-styled young man with long sideburns looking tall and fit dressed like

some Glam Rock performer in the purple sequined jumpsuit with black platform shoes and Elton John-style star sunglasses. The room was lit by a dozen torches in old-fashioned iron wall sconces and one wood-burning stove, giving things an eerie orange glow.

When one of the male vampires, clad as an old-fashioned 19th Century New York police officer complete with nightstick, noticed this new arrival, Petrov already had one stake out and poised to strike, impaling the fiend through his imitation tin badge for getting the point around a sternum into the heart. He screamed and fell backwards clutching the object with blood flowing, but proved incapable of removing it.

“Say good night, Angelique,” Jack declared, shifting the crucifix he wore front and center over the shirt and pulling out that small automatic crossbow (containing its twelve-shot modified clip of 6” wooden bolts) in the right grip, before firing it to slay one female vampire in her black leather cat costume, “the party’s over!”

Petrov swiftly targeted another eleven monsters with that rapid-fire trigger, hitting every single time on target (due to residual World War I marksmanship skills and the vampire hunter’s instinct inherited from Russian grandfather Dr. Ulvanov) as those costumed vampires writhed in agony before they ceased moving.

“The party is not over until I decide, Jack,” Angelique was defiant with her slight Cajun accent, even as thirteen minions had fallen to this estranged husband’s amazing reflexes, “take the fool alive and bring him to me.”

Bashing one daring undead male in a Spanish conquistador’s outfit with the crossbow, disarming him of his curved broadsword and almost breaking the man’s hook nose in knocking that adversary aside, Jack drew the battleaxe and decapitated another male vampire clad as the clown with pointed hat and white frilly rainbow jumpsuit including big floppy shoes. He next staked a buxom naked lady vampire in psychedelic body paint who reached out at him.

I may be older, but I’m not getting caught easily, darling.

Twenty-one remaining bloodsuckers soon had Petrov surrounded. Angelique and her Glam rock-clad ally (removing his sunglasses) watched as the hunter advanced inside that room, until the Spanish conquistador vampire blocking the nearer exit fell to a wooden crossbow bolt penetrating his breastplate armor from behind and collapsed gurgling blood.

What the hell? That wasn't mine.

Jack smiled and cringed at the same time seeing 5' 6" Daphne Petrov, in the purple mini-dress with its red horizontal stripe at the hem, the 2" plum pumps, tan fringe jacket and a large black handbag hanging crossed over the left shoulder. She handed a wide-eyed (green behind his round gold-framed glasses) wood crucifix-adorned 6' Peter Packer near her the second automatic crossbow. He wore his blue blazer and slacks, brown sweater vest, open-neck paisley shirt with orange ascot and brown loafers. Jack often regretted agreeing to Packer's interviewing him on this trip while Daphne took the wheel of her man's blue 1973 Ford Galaxie.

"Daddy," the brave young woman, bobbed brown hair held off her forehead by a violet headband above ice-blue eyes, asked him, "why'd you sneak off from our hotel without...?"

She paused, recognizing the head vampire (from old photos and memories) rising off that wooden throne prop (but not the blonde man at her mother's side), and soon had two stakes held in each hand, as some vampires confronted these new arrivals.

"Get your man out of here, sweetheart," Jack staked another lady vampire (that redhead dressed in royal-blue silk lingerie and red heels) with a swift stab, while decapitating one bald-shaven man (his Medieval armored suit had its helmet removed), "I've got this situation under control."

Now I have to worry about their safety too.

"How appropriate, Jack," Angelique taunted him, even as he glimpsed fear within her big eyes watching followers being destroyed, "risking our only surviving bitch puppy's life, just like letting little Cassandra drown on that Florida vacation to become a monster."

Bearing scars of the past, Petrov despised his wife for dredging up their family's painful memories to rattle him, losing the ax in severing a heavy vampire's muscular neck (dressed like a caveman with his right-shouldered black-spotted orange calf-length tunic and brown fur boots) as he swung a club, and soon drawing his short sword to replace it. He warded back opponents with blade and cross while keeping one stake handy for eliminating superior numbers, turning first clockwise and then counterclockwise despite tiring in the macabre slaughter dance.

Peter managed to wound two vampires, while Daphne staked the black-clad witch in the pointed hat and burnt a Vegas showgirl using her own silver crucifix necklace until tackled onto the floor. The woman's

colleague finished that fiend with a bolt through the heart from the right side under an armpit, but then needed Daphne's aid facing the previously-shot bloodsuckers (a man and woman dressed in tight red and white matching leotards as ballet dancers).

Jack lost his fedora to a dominatrix-clad female's whip, before staking her and slicing off a cowboy vampire's head beneath the ten-gallon black hat. He still had four undead enemies left surrounding him as seven others fled with Angelique and her male sidekick toward the staircase opposite from one Jack and his companions used getting here.

I can't let that bloodsucking bitch escape again.

"Get these captives out of here," the old man pointed out for Daphne and Peter the half-dozen restrained victims with his short sword, after they finished those dancers off with stake and crossbow bolt together, "and call the police."

Maybe they'll survive this night after all.

Staking a vampire biker in the German Army helmet as that fiend used a knife to slice Petrov narrowly across the back; the hunter chopped one short pirate's head away through the jaw parrying his cutlass, causing the flailing body to crash into the other duo here – a magician and Confederate officer costumed vampires – where they landed prone on that hardwood floor. Jack dropped the bloodstained sword and, pinning them with both knees, drove two more stakes through their hearts. He then glimpsed that curly blonde vampire taking one of the dozen torches lighting this loft and setting fire to the dry aged wood floorboards. A lady vampire in her Charlie Chaplin Little Tramp costume knocked over that stove next, spreading its coals to generate more flames covering Angelique's escape.

The reporters took costume articles off fallen vampires and gave those or their jackets to six naked captives they finally freed, after Peter retrieved Jack's ax to hack the chains or ropes. Flames spread along that south wall onto an arched ceiling, as Jack assisted his daughter and her boyfriend's efforts upon retrieving the fallen fedora. They moved those people toward and down the north stairs used in arriving here, with the hunter leading their way to the second floor.

And I've still got an unfinished job for tonight – can't let HER escape.

Petrov saw five vampires now forming a rear guard atop the main staircase leading to the building's first floor, as Angelique and three others

descended those stairs, the lady tearing away her costume's skirt down to pantaloons for easier movements. Peter reached the double-bladed battleaxe back to its owner, but Jack shook his head no while Daphne took out the last two stakes from her purse. This hunter addressed his companions as the vampires waited 20' away, daring these humans about getting past them with smoke odors drifting from upstairs.

"Keep it, Packer, and protect Daphne. We're going through them and I'll get Angelique myself." He reached Peter the gun, but that man refused it. "It won't kill 'em, but will hurt."

"I don't like guns." The liberal New York reporter adjusted his glasses while keeping the short-handled battleaxe instead. "Weren't you listening to me on this trip, sir?"

"Pansy," Petrov grumbled before handing the automatic Colt to Daphne, having taught her and his two sons how to handle firearms when they were teenagers, "here, baby girl, you'll take it for self-protection. This town's got other things besides vampires lurking around in some of its shadows. Even taking stupid risks, you've done me proud tonight."

"No, you might need it. Be careful, daddy." She pushed his offered pistol away and he holstered it back inside that trench coat. "I don't want to lose both my parents tonight, but do whatever you have to with her."

The out-of-town trio charged, with Peter at Jack's right and Daphne his left, to meet those awaiting creatures as freed captives stayed back watching in horrified fascination. She plunged two stakes into that male vampire dressed in the black top hat, white tie, shirt and black tuxedo with long-tailed jacket as he swung his sword cane through the air at the 24-year-old lady before she ducked to slay him. Glimpsing that act, Jack again felt pride for his daughter.

Peter buried the ax's blade into a male (dressed in surgeon's white attire with cap, mask, gown and gloves) vampire's face and throat, before the blonde female bloodsucker wearing her Charlie Chaplin Little Tramp outfit tackled him onto the dirty worn carpeted floor, soon beating the man with that outfit's cane. Jack impaled another female vampire (curly dark-haired Creole clad with gypsy peasant white blouse, green long skirt and red bandana) between the bosoms using another stake, while stabbing the Afro-wearing black vampire (dressed like movie private eye John Shaft in his red turtleneck shirt, black leather pants, jacket and boots costume) with

his short sword before they fell together across that floor near the staircase's landing.

Now I still – have to – stake this big buck.

Petrov was shoved rightward but held his quarry as they rolled down steps wrestling for advantage; the sword's handle and pommel bruising that aged man's chest a few times in falling. Packer struggled against being held down by the Chaplin woman's cane as she leaned to feed on him from heightened blood-lust and tore off his crucifix's chain. She kicked Daphne away with a swift right leg, the brunette landing on her buttocks trying to help the pinned boyfriend. Forced to choose between aiding a father or lover, Daphne recovered from being dazed and winded by that kick, and discovered her silver crucifix had fallen off somewhere now due to a broken chain. Knowing her purse was out of stakes and with no other weapon to save Peter, she then spotted one thin broken baluster spoke with its sharp jagged edge along that balcony's railing. Crawling over and pulling it free, Daphne Petrov plunged the wooden object through that vampire's back piercing her heart and getting briefly sprayed by the fiend's blood.

"Wow! Sugar – you're amazing!"

Peter shoved the quivering bloodsucker with a shocked expression aside, her fangs inches from penetrating his carotid artery, before he and Daphne hugged each other.

"Daddy," the woman wiped her face with a handkerchief from her bag after these lovers stood together, and raced toward the landing as Peter handed her the automatic crossbow after shooting the flailing surgeon-costumed vampire (Petrov's ax still in his head) through the heart to finish that monster.

Jack felt sore in several places tumbling onto ground level, but thankfully suffered no broken bones at his age, burning the black vampire's left cheek above him with the cross while being choked by those powerful hands, the sword still embedded through that fiend's chest.

I should've used, Petrov released the crucifix against that opponent's smoking flesh as he began losing consciousness, *a stake – instead of the sword on him – before...*

Suddenly that large vampire shuddered when a wooden bolt pierced his head in the left temple with fangs bared in triumph over Jack. As the partly-disfigured black man turned to see who had attacked him anew, a

bolt pierced his heart beside the sword's blade from Daphne firing her crossbow. Quivering at that fatal impact, he fell to the old man's left.

"Are you okay, daddy?" The dutiful daughter and her New York boyfriend led those six captives down toward the prone vampire hunter as he sat up coughing and bleeding slightly from the shallow knife slash across his back. "Let's get you and these people to safety."

"No," he croaked from a sore throat and refused her or Peter's aid standing, pulling his sword from that unmoving vampire's chest and wiping the blade across the thing's shirt before sheathing it, "I swore she wouldn't escape me again and meant it."

Petrov noticed the building's front doors were both wide open, and, after retrieving his fedora off the floor from where it had fallen, told the couple: "Get those people out and call the authorities. Your mother's still my problem."

Stumbling through those doors and looking each way outside along dark sidewalks and both intersecting streets, Jack caught his breath taking a moment to recover.

My wounds are trivial. I can't see Angelique or her followers anywhere nearby, but they couldn't have gotten very far in a short time.

Waving to Daphne, Peter and the fleeing people they had released crossing North Peters Street together, flames engulfing that building behind them in third floor windows, Jack Petrov depended on his vampire tracking instincts and began walking south toward the river on Iberville Street's east sidewalk, sounds of other Halloween celebrations overheard drifting through warm night air. After about half-a-block, the old hunter stopped beside a staircase with wrought iron railings leading into one basement establishment whose neon sign above read Cajun Frank's Bar and BBQ Grill. The detective paused atop those concrete steps, tempted by old demons ended with seven years of Gotham Alcoholics Anonymous meetings after an adult lifetime indulging them, before his instincts registered vampire presences behind the red-painted wood door.

Come on, Jack, it's just a bar and you didn't come to drink.

Entering the establishment and its low-lit interior with costumed and normally-dressed patrons celebrating or abstaining from Halloween (but not drinking), Petrov scanned the crowd. He recalled Angelique's Marie Antoinette outfit, her blonde servant's sequined costume, and the two other women wearing sexy Little Bo Peep and movie theater usherette attire, but

did not spot those clothes within a cavernous room. Deciding to thin out potential victims for bloodsuckers somewhere inside this building, the man cleared his throat and stood atop an unoccupied booth's empty table.

"I need everyone's attention," the room's corner jukebox played a novelty comedy song ("*Monster Mash*"), so he whistled loudly with two fingers stuck into his mouth, gaining most of this crowd's notice, "there's a big fire nearby and it could spread here! Everybody get out now!"

A chorus of laughter followed from half-drunken patrons as two bouncers approached Petrov's perch to remove the unwelcome stranger. Reaching into a holster under that jacket, the man pulled his automatic pistol on the approaching muscular duo, cocking its hammer.

"Back off, boys, I'm an old Army marksman." As the men in red and black T-shirts and black uniform pants obeyed, Jack fired his pistol into the ceiling twice, getting that full crowd's undivided attention. "Everyone leave – NOW! Go watch the fire just up the street."

Sounds of distant emergency vehicles supported his claims as patrons drifted out the front door for promised excitement. Climbing down, Jack grabbed a long, mustached, brown-haired, white-shirted bartender's left arm as he joined the exodus and forced that man to face him.

"Hold up a minute there, bud. Did you see a woman dressed like some French aristocrat from the 18th Century? She was with two gals wearing Bo Peep and theater usherette costumes shadowed by this blonde dude in his flashy purple outfit."

The man resisted breaking away from Petrov after that question and rubbed his mouth in recalling various costumes patrons were wearing around here tonight.

"Yeah, I did see those folks right enough," his accent was slightly Cajun, "they went back where Mr. Carlisle's office is. I think a lady you mentioned has visited him here before tonight. He owns some local properties. I'd better tell them about the—"

"Thanks," Jack patted his left shoulder and moved toward the room's rear inner exit that heavysset thinning brown-haired bartender motioned toward with a left hand, "go watch that fire. I'll let them know what's happening outside."

Holstering his pistol, the hunter got out two of four remaining stakes. Now, it's four against one.

Entering that heavy varnished wooden door marked Private on its high-placed label, Jack wished he had brought the automatic crossbow (or taken Daphne's) for this part of his hunt, but swallowed any residual trepidation after closing that entrance and latching its interior deadbolt lock (signaling anyone with vampire hearing of his arrival). Two stakes ready for stabbing any monsters, he saw both side doors along the short hallway under dim overhead lamps and another door at the far end. Passing between side exits, they burst open and a long shepherd's staff disarmed him of the left stake with one hard blow on arthritic knuckles. Red-painted nails from hands inside a gold-braided red jacket arrested his right wrist, before the women shoved that man against the left wood-paneled wall. Bo Peep removed his silver crucifix by breaking its chain with her staff's hook.

"Now, now, it's not fair to sneak up on our mistress," the pigtailed black-haired lady dressed like an usher with the gold chin-strapped red pillbox hat hissed in Petrov's right ear while keeping his stake hand pinned, "even if you're still technically her husband."

"Angelique said he's to be captured," the sexy blonde shepherdess with a lace cap above curled neck-length blonde hair had the deeper sultry voice opposite her companion's before it turned into the naughty little girl's teasing tones, "but she can't begrudge us a little taste."

"Yeah," the usherette pushed her large breasts inside that gold-buttoned red jacket (above red panty briefs, black tights and shined shoes) against Jack, licking his neck, "I always wanted to taste a vampire hunter's blood."

The blonde stepped back briefly, keeping her curve-topped staff against Jack's throat, so he could glimpse her blue frilly mini-dress, white tights and laced boots, and then leaned in for kissing their victim's left jaw.

"Let's be quick. She and Bobby are waiting in Carlisle's office."

"Fine," the usherette sighed and bared her fangs in synch with the other vampire as they leaned for biting, "this won't hurt long, grandpa."

They halted as a man's throat cleared behind Bo Peep, before the ladies and Jack noticed Bobby, the California surfer-accented curly-haired blonde man, standing inside that far doorway, staring at their actions with angry blue-green eyes and blood-stained pouting lips.

"Now, girls, Angelique said she'll deal with her old man personally. Bring him in."

When that deadly duo released his arms, Petrov brought the stake still in his right palm down to slay the usherette and shove her body against the other vampire as both fell down. Pulling one more stake from his coat's inner storage loops (having lost track of one he dropped earlier); the vampire hunter pounced, deflecting prone Bo Peep's staff and impaling her heart as she screamed. Hissing, Bobby closed that door to protect Angelique somewhere inside the office beyond. Exhausted after those exertions, Jack Petrov slowly stood and grabbed the shepherd's staff off the tiled floor, breaking it across his right knee into two roughly equal pieces with sharp ends. He then charged that closed door and found it locked from the inside.

Do you think any door will keep me from getting to you here, darling?

He applied his right shoulder three times before that wood cracked and its lock gave way. Inside this office, lit by one curved green-hooded lamp on a mahogany desk, Jack found the wall switches by the door that also turned on a fan combined with overhead globed light fixtures. The room smelled of death, but there were no signs his quarry remained here. The old hunter still felt them both nearby however.

They've left something behind.

Seeing the red leather executive chair turned away behind the desk, in a room filled with its few other mahogany furniture pieces including two bookcases, Jack turned that seat clockwise using his right shoe and found an old man there with disheveled white hair, widened brown eyes and gaping mouth, above two sets of bites in the neck, spilled blood across that stained tan suit. Angelique's now erstwhile ally, landlord Robert Philippe Carlisle owned the old whorehouse she used as a lair, but Petrov would never learn this fixated on finding his wife. He searched these surroundings, soon finding one hidden staircase leading upstairs and deeper inside this building. The vampire hunter overheard two sets of running footsteps heading in that direction.

I'm getting too old for all this crap, but I will finish her tonight.

Ascending wrought iron steps and holding onto both railings with those staff halves as his body felt exhausted and limbs heavier, Petrov somehow reached a second story storage room for the bar/BBQ restaurant downstairs filled with stacked alcohol crates and other dry goods boxes, the heavy walk-in freezer with a closed door along the area's back wall. They would be hard to find in here, but not impossible, the room lit by hooded

overhead lamps hanging from the ceiling and several tall windows letting street lamp light shine through (along with that glow from the nearby building fire).

“Oh, Jackson, my Jackson,” Angelique addressed him from her current hiding place, as that accented voice echoed across the room, “have our lives together come to this foolish chase seeking blood vengeance against me for leaving you a dozen years ago? I’ve moved on, *mon cherie*. Why can’t you do the same? I’ve never stalked your life, as well I could have.”

“Come on, Angie,” he engaged her, listening for any slight giveaway noises and moving between crate stacks, fading eyesight seeking signs of her or that blonde male companion, “was our life together in Gotham with the kids so bad aside from occasional straying I’m sorry about? I provided for all of your needs to the best of my ability from P.I. work. I may not have cried for little Cassie after she drowned, but felt broken inside until granting her body peace ten years later and three after you’d abandoned us to come back here.”

Quickly looking left and right leaving the cover of box stacks in moving nearer one oval-topped high window facing Iberville Street below, Jack almost reacted too late at Bobby’s dive off one tall box tower almost reaching the ceiling, headed straight toward him and reddened eyes hungering for blood (some of Carlisle’s fluids still around his mouth). The hunter fell backwards toward the hardwood floor, bringing two jagged staff halves up and pierced the blonde vampire’s chest to either side of his sternum. Grunting and gurgling as his lungs were impaled, Bobby fell toward Jack until the man used both feet propelling him onward and out that window, crashing through glass panes and wooden frame sections to flail about before hitting the pavement below screaming.

“Bravo, Jack,” the 5’ 4” Angelique leaped from her perch off boxes stacked five high halfway across the room, as Petrov lay prone with Bobby’s blood staining his coat and breathing hard, “you have defeated my lover of seven years. Robert Frazer was another gigolo who came here seeking love and turned tricks with men or women, until I gave him eternal beauty as Uriah once had me.”

She stripped off the powdered wig, letting it fall to the floor in revealing radiant golden-brown curled hair, as slipper-clad feet stepped beside Jack. Her gown’s upper bodice remained on with frilly old-fashioned

pantaloon and sheer white stockings. That mane appeared slightly disheveled but beautiful under low lighting, as did her youthful face and big blue eyes, those orbs looking wistfully upon this aged, estranged mate.

“After I had you declared dead in 1964,” regaining strength, Jack sat up on both elbows, feeling the knife, sword, gun and one stake still under his coat, but exhausted as a 74-year-old body reminded him of its condition, “I never remarried and seldom dated women, whether age appropriate for me or not. I once told you how I killed my first wife Phyllis in the Catskills on our 1939 honeymoon because she had become a werewolf. Sure, the official death certificate read gunshot wound complications, but Phyllis—”

“ENOUGH,” Angelique cried, drowning out the recollection before she knelt at his right side on broken glass, “this is why I’d tired of living with you, Jackson. My private eye husband had all the big adventures stalking monsters in shadows, leaving me alone caring for our brats and often wondering if he was coming back. Your occasional unfaithfulness was forgivable. I had more excitement growing up in the La Barre Circus with my parents and later playing both snake charmer and acrobat on the midway or under the big tent. Becoming a vampire made me feel truly *alive* for the first time in many years.”

Sighing about her disdain at being Mrs. Petrov, stay-at-home mother of four (three after July 1956), Jack recalled one book (*The Feminine Mystique*) he found in Angelique’s belongings after she had returned here and met vampire master Uriah Ives.

“Sure, go ahead and blame me for trapping you as a wife and mother after I’d freed your circus of that alien thing taking it over behind the scenes. I fell in love during our big adventure together, years after getting over Phyllis, but wanted you safe from those dangers. The darkness I fought touched our little family anyhow.”

He gave his undead wife a betrayed stare as she reached out and snatched his fedora away to sniff its perspiration odors along the hatband before discarding that, freeing his mashed-down thinning silver locks, and then shaking her head.

“I offered you immortality the last time we met, *cheri*,” she reminded him, “even with an aging body. The power of my blood could have rejuvenated your youth again.”

“It’s false immortality, doll.” Petrov snorted, feeling a last stake near his right hand just under the coat’s flap, “We had responsibilities waiting in

Gotham. Frank was only 15, Harry 14 and Daphne 12. Who would've raised them? You had no immediate family left in Louisiana. My widowed sister-in-law in New York was too sick with cancer to help."

"I could have changed them all, keeping our family together for eternity."

"Not my kids," he almost spat those words into her face two feet from his side as she leaned ever closer, hands touching his coat's lower hems, "condemned to darkness, so don't flatter yourself. I freed Cassandra by destroying what that sea monster made her."

"*C'est la mort en vie*, Jackson," she grabbed his slumped shoulders and pulled the man's head closer for her bared fangs, "so now I mercifully release you from the further pains of age by your choosing death. *Au revoir, mon amour.*"

Almost permitting her deadly kiss at his neck, tired after 74 years of hard living, Jack found the strength and slight-of-hand to pull that last stake from the trench coat, plunging it into her chest between D-cup bosoms he recalled playing with inside their house's master bedroom and an apartment shared before that. She screeched and struck his jaw with her right hand, the blue-painted nails leaving deep scratches before the woman fell backwards and across that floor. Petrov slowly got to his feet, witnessing Angelique gasping for breath while clawing at that stake attempting its removal.

Any master vampire is always harder to destroy; the man recalled from long experience against other such fiends, *I'll have to decapitate her next.*

Taking the sword, but keeping the knife sheathed in case it was needed, he retrieved his small flask (holding whiskey in years past) filled with holy water and poured it over that blade as a purification ritual. The man then knelt with a left knee against his wife's waist to restrain her writhing body and turned the lady's head for facing him with one gentle left hand, the sword in his right grip, and looked into those blue eyes, ducts shedding blood tears with a pouting plea across luscious bleeding lips. He almost wanted to put the weapons away, remove the stake and accept death, effectively forgiving her for their 12-year estrangement.

"Tell, Daphne and the boys," she gasped with blood trickling from her mouth's corners, "I never stopped loving my precious children, and still love you too, Jack."

Nodding once with his blue-gray eyes tearing up, Jack Petrov brought that blade down across Angelique's neck, silencing her lilting Cajun accented voice and spraying blood outward as he severed the head with one sharp blow. Leaving that sword on the wood floor and standing while wiping Angelique's blood off face and hands using one pocket handkerchief, the vampire hunter covered her beheaded body with his trench coat. The old man located some charcoal and matches for destroying her remains, smelling smoke from the earlier fire headed in this direction. Collecting fedora and flask, Petrov placed one atop his head and the other in a left outer jacket pocket opposite the knife, exiting down a south window's fire escape. He reached street level, glimpsing red lights from fire engines yards away and felt drained after this ordeal. The hunter carelessly stepped off a curb onto Iberville Street, intending one brief walk near the river for clearing his head, when the silver Lincoln Continental Mark IV with shining chrome hubcaps and trim barreled north along that road and struck him with its right front fender, knocking that elderly body through the air.

Grandpa Ulvanov warned me in a dream how he died like this.

Even after he crashed against the side of a parked green and white Volkswagen minibus and rolled to the ground stopping face-up, Jack recalled that vision-like dream from years earlier, witnessing his Russian (medical doctor/vampire hunter) grandfather hit by a horse-drawn wagon on a rural dirt road near St. Petersburg in 1895. With blurred vision, he saw the Lincoln screech its tires and back until stopping the right rear wheel near his fractured skull. The car was driven by a vampire, he realized, overhearing Bobby Frazer's taunting laid-back California voice.

"You killed my beautiful Angel," he leaned down and spat in Petrov's face, the sequined jumpsuit covered in blood from where he had removed staff halves (neither hitting the heart), "so I'll grind your bones into the pavement, without bothering to suck any blood, old man."

Jack began losing consciousness from various internal injuries, glimpsing or overhearing dramatic events that unfolding during the next few minutes nearby.

Bobby was about to reclaim the car's wheel (Angelique gave him that vehicle last year), when gun shots rang out and both left tires deflated. His head turned to behold Peter Packer now wielding the pistol which fell from Jack's black holster when struck by that car. Hissing at the approaching reporter, the vampire was hit with every other bullet left in the clip at almost

point blank range. Angered by this meddler's intervention, he ripped the driver's side door off its hinges and flung that object straight at Packer, dislocating the man's left shoulder and forcing him to drop his emptied pistol. Before he could attack, Bobby was impacted by wooden bolts and saw Daphne moving toward that prone boyfriend, using her father's other rapid-fire hand crossbow versus this last vampire as she screamed: "Leave my men alone, bloodsucker!"

Each hitting his head or torso, one of those nine remaining shots finally penetrated the vampire's heart. He coughed blood and fell unmoving against the parked car's side. Daphne then dropped that weapon and helped shift the door off her injured boyfriend pinning him against the street. He cried when she gripped his left arm in aiding her man to stand again.

"ARG, I think he dislocated my shoulder!"

"Hold still," she grasped the wincing reporter's left arm and then shoved the loose joint, popping it back into place with one sudden motion, "there it's fixed, you big baby."

"How'd you do that?" He rotated the limb despite its soreness and followed her toward Jack Petrov's prone body. "It feels better. Thanks."

"I was a nursing student at Gotham U.," she admitted, racing to kneel at her father's side behind the Lincoln, "before switching to journal— daddy, lie still. We'll get an ambulance."

Nodding to Peter as she rubbed Jack's face, the 26-year-old male reporter hurried along that street seeking authorities around the fire for summoning medical aid.

"Your mother," Petrov gasped in finding it harder to breathe, staring up at his 24-year-old daughter's ice-blue, tear-filled eyes, "told me she loved our family before I killed..."

Closing eyes and exhaling his last, Jackson Sergeivich Petrov already knew if Daphne had any sons, one would inherit his maternal bloodline's vampire hunting instinct.

ISH-JIN-KEE'S TOUCH

W. B. Kek

"You okay? You're kinda shaky."

"I'm fine." He paid for his coffee and took it to a table by a window. He looked out at the parking lot. Beyond it roared a busy four-lane.

For a few minutes he just sat. His knees trembled. So did his hands. His ears rang. He inhaled, then took a sip of coffee and scalded his upper lip. "Yeah, shaky," he said.

His name was Casher. He ran a small IT consulting firm in Omaha, Nebraska.

He had come to this small town in Iowa to put his gaze directly on a woman he knew only online. He was not sure he wanted to meet her. He was not sure he would let her know he was there, in her home town. He did not want to seem like a stalker.

Still, he worried. All summer they had spent their days video chatting. Not a day had been missed.

A week ago it changed. She told him she had seen something outside. Taller than a man, it had eyes that glowed red. It terrified her. She said it flew on wings like a buzzard's. It looked like an old man in raccoon skin kilt. She mentioned being Native American and hinted at dark legends.

All contact then ceased. He tried to call her up on the chat program but there was no response. He emailed her and got no reply. He telephoned but got only an answering machine.

Driving to the Iowa town felt foolish. Move on, he told himself. She saw you as a summer's emotional affair and her silence is a signal for you to take it stoically and leave it in the past.

He found her house easily enough. It surprised him how well-kept it was. It was a brick-and-siding two story gambrel with a landscaped lawn. A late model compact was parked in the driveway. It was an established neighborhood, upscale and quiet. It had big trees and shaded walks. The few children visible were polite and well-dressed. A big tree stood in her front lawn, a portly older man in a black suit letting a pair of Sealyham terriers lift legs toward its roots before walking on.

He nodded to the gentleman but his gaze returned to the tree.

He remembered her telling him of the threatening thing standing beside it. Ish-Jin-Kee she had called it, citing her Ioway folklore. It was some sort of trickster, she'd said.

He squinted. Were those scratch marks high on the tree's trunk?

He had not intended to get out of his car. He had not planned on approaching her front door. Yet he kept telling himself that getting so close only to scurry away was immature. A man would knock, say hello, his father's voice told him. He needed to find out what was going on. Had she gone mad? Taken bad meds? Did she need help? He had to find out.

Trouble was, he had no excuse to be there. He had driven nine hours. He had not just happened to be in the neighborhood. The only reason for him to be there was Elana. His concern for her had driven him. He worried that she was cracking up. In some sort of difficulty.

Or haunted by something evil, he thought.

He shivered.

He had read about the Ish-Jin-Kee online. In Ioway lore, Ish-Jin-Kee was a fallen son of the Sun God. He often took the form of an old man. He was a bringer of sexual pleasure but a trickster, a harbinger of evil; many other things. It showed up just before a disaster. It was seen before many a death.

He did not want Elana to die.

He feared she would belittle him and send him away humiliated. Humiliating himself by being cowardly about it scared him more because it involved self-image. He raised his nerve, gritted his teeth and pressed the doorbell button. Hearing nothing, he knocked on the door.

It swung partly open.

"Hello? Elana?" He poked his head in. He smelled dust and a metallic scent like overheated wiring. "Elana?"

He pushed the door open and took a step into the house. "Everything okay?" The odd ozone smell tingled his sinuses. He sneezed, then gagged. Was something burning?

Something thumped deeper in the house. Clothes rustled.

He followed the smell into a den off the main room. He found Elana sitting at a computer. The screen showed him his own face from a week ago, frozen as the video chat connection had been severed.

"Elana, what --?"

She sagged to her left in the chair. The back of her head was a bloody pulp.

Every hair on Casher's body prickled. He whirled, sure someone stood behind him.

It was a man, a thing, a being so tall it had to lean slightly to avoid the ceiling. It stood dark and somehow formal, its eyes red and glowing. Raccoon pelts hung around its waist, its skin looked like sun-shriveled leather.

There was blood spatter all over it.

"Who are you?" Casher asked. What are you? he thought.

The thing glared at him. "I'm Elana's fate."

Her fate, he thought. He was slow to process this information.

"You are the one." Its wing unfurled, ragged and dusty and a chitinous claw pointed to the image frozen on Elana's computer screen. "You came here to tempt her away from me."

"What?" It laughed, calling him stupid.

"You killed her."

"Did I? Ask yourself the questions howling in you like starving wolves. Ask if I'm even real. Maybe you killed her and dreamed me up. How long do you think she's been sitting there dead for you? What took you so long to find her? What could she possibly have seen in you? She didn't even like you. You're such a loser and you're so lost."

Its voice, a dry rattle, a vulture's cry, wind across sand, wind in trees, storm rumble and rain slash, sounded more and more like his own, Casher noticed. He snapped out of his daze. He took a step toward the thing, heart hammering.

It was no longer there.

He scanned the room, ran through the house. He found no sign of the Ish-Jin-Kee. Elana was the only one there.

Elana and himself, he thought.

The cops would love that.

He left the house. He drove out of her neighborhood. Had he closed the front door of Elana's house? Did it matter? Once or twice he swore he saw a huge shape swoop over his car, blotting out the stars, as the dusk dimmed toward night. He drove until he saw a Starbucks.

He went in for coffee. He was shaky.

He sat sipping, thinking.

He looked at the palms of his hands. Was there blood on them? He brushed dust off them, found a dark feather stained with blood clinging to his trousers. He hoped no one in the Starbuck's or behind the counter had seen it. He tried not to think of the ragged wings.

Had he imagined it all?

He finished his coffee and left. He drove the nine hours home. He never heard from Elana again.

A week or so later a silo caught fire in Elana's home town. Aflame, it fell, crushing nearby houses, which caught fire. The conflagration spread to engulf Elana's neighborhood.

He had begun to think of her as imaginary, like Ish-Jin-Kee.

Elana became just one of the thirty-nine dead from the fire that gutted her town, a statistic to forget.

Casher soon thought of her rarely and then not at all. Running his company kept him busy.

The next summer he took an Alaskan cruise. He wanted to watch Orca breach in British Columbia's fjords. He intended to stroll in Vancouver's parks, snap pictures of the totem poles.

He sent one postcard from the ship to his employees. It mentioned having seen what he described as a huge eagle soar past a full moon. Its postscript wondered if eagles got that big, or flew at night.

No mention of the Ish-Jin-Kee.

Casher was reported missing from the ship when it reached Vancouver.

His company, after a year's struggle, broke up.

No one ever bothered with a headstone for him. What was the point, with no body?

* * *

Sometimes his old telephone number rings and there is no one there.

That's him.

He has nothing to say.

CRYSTAL COMES HOME

Lee Clark Zumpe

Crystal scrambles down the side of Snake Den Ridge, playfully skipping through a mountain laurel tunnel. The harvest moon splashes the sky with swirls of orange and purple twilight, and composes a symphony of weird and wonderful shadows which flutter throughout the forest. The little girl stops at a small outcropping of bald rock the locals call Grim Knob. She admires the spectacular view. Her eyes dart across the valley below. The dim street lamps from the tiny village of Emmett's Cove twinkle in the distance, and an icy breeze whistles through the Eastern hemlocks at her back.

Carefully, she gets down on her hands and knees and crawls over to the edge. She peers over the craggy ledge hesitantly, gazing down the side of the steep cliff. She lays flat on her stomach, rests her chin upon her folded arms. It is a long way down to the boulder-strewn banks of Cold Spring Branch. She can barely hear the distant voice of the talkative creek drifting up into the chilly night.

In a minute, she is racing down the trail again, smiling.

Crystal immediately recognizes the vestiges of old Otis Greely's pioneer cabin with its three courses of saddle-notched chestnut logs. She traces the stone wall that encircled the farmstead, now overgrown with thick vegetation and inhabited by graceful shadows. She has roosted upon that wall dozens of times, her little legs dangling, while admiring the patches of Dutchman's pipe and bellwort skirting the trail. Many afternoons she has spent simply watching Yellow-bellied sap-suckers flirting with a nearby tuliptree.

Very few things about this place frighten her anymore. Over the years, she has fostered a deep intimacy with the quiet forest.

Continuing down the side of the ridge, the night begins to grow colder. Stars shiver above the treetops as arctic winds begin to rove across the Appalachian highlands. Too early for snow, but the promise of a cold winter is more than a whisper on the icy breath of October. As Crystal draws closer to Emmett's Cove she notices the familiar scent of pine-smoke. The thought of huddling beneath a blanket in front of a stone fireplace conjures up a comforting sensation of warmth in her soul.

The forest grows darker around Dwain Bryson's place, where sinister pools of uncanny gloom rally to blot out the moonglow.

Crystal approaches the cottage discreetly, focusing on the splinters of sterile fluorescent light seeping through a crack in the drapery. The air here is still and stale, the ground beneath her bare feet sodden and cold. Shielded by an ancient stretch of hardwoods untouched by the logging industry, tucked neatly between two sheer bluffs in an eerie grotto, the secluded plot engenders a sense of unnatural dread in its few visitors. Regional folklore claims the native Americans avoided the place in centuries past, fearful of malignant spirits rumored to haunt it.

Dwain Bryson always shrugged off such superstitious nonsense.

She peeks through the crack in the drapery, studying the small kitchen. A mountain of cookware and plates sits upon the countertop, leaning precariously over the wash-basin. Flies hover over a waste-basket overflowing with scraps of raw meat. Crimson droplets speckle the floor.

A stewpot bubbles incessantly on the woodburning stove.

It is just as she remembers it.

Crystal manages to slip inside the cottage unnoticed, creeping through the pools of darkness betrayed by lantern light. Carefully, she slips from room to room, anxiously trying to find the owner of the place.

The stench billowing from the kitchen makes her gag and choke.

She finds Dwain in the Secret Chamber below the cottage. She glides down the steps stealthily, desperately trying not to disturb him until the time is right. He works frantically, his back to the wooden staircase, his bulky arms in constant motion. Dwain has put on weight. Too much stew.

A steady stream of blood dribbles off the side of the cutting table and onto the floor. Crystal notices the crimson-tinged mop propped against the stone wall in the corner, the carton of discarded bones draped by cobwebs.

She sees the little bleached skulls of twenty children lined up methodically along a shelf on the far side of the room.

"Hello daddy," Crystal says.

Dwain whirls about, bloodied butcher knife still firm in his hand.

"I've come home," she says.

For an instant, a spark of recognition glimmers in the man's eyes at the sound of her voice. He squints, trying to identify the little girl cowering in the darkness; but, shadows zealously cloak her face. His eyebrows twitch

and his brow wrinkles. His lips part as if he might speak, but the words elude him.

“Don’t be afraid daddy,” Crystal says, an innocent smile blossoming on her face. “I know you won’t hurt me. You promised.”

Dwain Bryson grunts and slowly raises the knife into the dead air of the Secret Chamber. His left hand stretches out menacingly across the darkness, fingers writhing like baby copperheads. The dim glow of recollection quickly gives way to a rush of rage and bloodlust.

Crystal bolts back up the steps screaming, and Dwain takes off after her.

Outside, clouds have eclipsed the harvest moon temporarily and the malevolent murk enveloping Dwain Bryson’s cottage spread gravely through the forest. As Crystal clambers back along the trail, she can hear his heavy breath close behind; his ponderous footfalls sound like angry summer thunder rolling through the mountains. She bounds over rotting logs, fords a slender creek on moss-covered stones. Retracing her steps, she begins to climb up the steep ridge.

Dwain coughs and sputters a curse under his breath.

She dashes by the stone wall of Otis Greely’s place as the moon casts aside the wispy veil of clouds. Moonglow bathes the forest, and Dwain hesitates, his heart pounding in his chest. He staggers alongside a tuliptree, hands gripping his knees. His butcher knife falls to the forest floor. His health is poor, but he knows he must not allow this girl to slip through his fingers. Only one child escaped him in all his years, and she did not run very far.

Crystal catches her breath as she ascends through a rosebay rhododendron tunnel. Dwain trails her, lingering in some shady tangle farther down the slope. She misses playing hide-and-seek with her brothers and sisters in the Appalachian backwoods; she misses hearing her mother’s stories told beside the campfire. She misses wandering through the woods collecting wildflowers to place on her grandmother’s grave.

Dwain bursts out of the darkness and lunges at her, and Crystal yelps. She dodges him narrowly, and sprints off down the trail.

“I’ll catch you yet, girl!” Dwain barks, shambling after her as quickly as his legs will carry him.

Finally, Dwain emerges from a snarl of mountain laurel and looks down upon the little girl. Crystal backs reluctantly toward the edge of Grim

Knob, eyes fixed firmly to the ground. The wind tosses her blond hair delicately.

“Thought you could get away from me, did you?” Dwain growls. “Ain’t no one can hide from me in these woods. They’re my woods.”

“But daddy,” Crystal whimpers.

“Don’t call me that, girl! I ain’t got no children, not no more...”

“Don’t you recognize me, daddy?” Crystal lifts her head, and the moon paints it full of life and innocence. “It’s me: Crystal.”

Dwain sees the face of his daughter and he shudders. He shambles forward waveringly, staring at the little girl. He wants to run his fingers through her hair, hold her tiny hand, kiss her forehead. He wants to tell her he is sorry for what happened ten years ago.

He can not do any of those things, because she knows.

She knows what he did to her mother during the harsh winter a decade ago. She knows how much he had savored the taste, how he had grown addicted to it. She knows what became of her brothers and sisters over the years, what atrocities he had committed to feed his obsession.

Dwain charges Crystal, his eyes pulsing orbs of scarlet rage; his arms outstretched and fingers clasping as they had been ten years ago. Crystal stands patiently as he approaches, shivers as his feet slip on the cold rock. He sails straight through her and plunges over the ledge.

Crystal sheds a tear and glances up toward the star-speckled sky. As the echo of Dwain’s dying cries fade in the distance, she too fades and joins the weird and wonderful shadows set aflutter throughout the forest by the harvest moon.

BAIT AND CHASE

A. J. Humpage

Blind in the darkness; senses paralysed.

Death stalked him.

The sensation of moisture spread across his face and his shirt, a tenuous mixture of perspiration and blood.

Steve Carson reached up and touched his shoulder, felt the seamy texture of blood oozing from the deep laceration that had riven his skin some moments earlier. The sting of pain had started to dissipate.

He squatted against a wall, waited there for some time, crowded by a constricted, primal fear that threatened to shred his heart, while the thickening darkness threatened to suffocate him. The longer he stared into the gloom, the more the shadows began to merge in his fettered mind. He couldn't tell if they were real or part of his frightened, overloaded imagination.

He sucked in short, stilted gasps to fill his aching lungs, to regain himself, to finally catch his breath. Raw emotion pushed through the heavy dread of the desperate situation in which he'd landed. He had spent the last few hours running from a man who had chased him through the darkness of empty tunnels and passageways, intent on death.

An awful outcome that lay in wait.

A noise to his left made him stiffen. Fingers curled tight around the iron bar in his right hand.

Thick silence followed.

Carson knew he couldn't stay there; vulnerable and weakened and unable to see a thing. He had to keep moving, even though he knew there was no way out of the claustrophobic tunnels. All the entrances of the disused mine had been sealed – deliberately – so he couldn't escape, but he knew he had to find the creeping shadow that had been stalking him since he'd entered the tunnels four hours earlier. He *had* to end the chase.

Regret trickled into his veins, but there was nothing he could do now. Greed had brought him to the depths of despair and shallow fright. All for the lure of high stakes and the overwhelming scent of money.

Another sound filled the darkness; metallic and shifting in resonance. He stood and listened intently, heard a stifled breath that seemed to linger in

the silence.

Peter Guzman was close by. The man who had been chasing him.

Carson held out the iron bar, ready to swing it at any shadow that loitered too close. Ragged heartbeat clawed beneath his ribcage and made him nauseous, but he steadied himself against the rush. Oily perspiration leaked from swollen pores, made it hard to hold the bar, so he used both hands for a tighter grip.

A series of echoes filtered through the black maw before him – advancing – and then, within a heartbeat, something scythed through the darkness and flashed in Carson's eyes. Instinctively he swiped the bar and it cleaved against Guzman's samurai sword, the clash of metal against metal reverberating against the clammy walls.

Without a pause, Carson swung again to stave off another blow, but he stumbled off balance and fell to one knee and when he looked up he saw the outline of Guzman's shadow holding the sword.

Even through the gloom – that instant – he could see a rudimentary dressing covering Guzman's eye, wounded hours earlier. His other eye looked wide and distant, his mouth drawn back into a primitive snarl.

"No, Peter, don't do this, I'm begging you," Carson said, exposed. "Please. We don't need to do this."

Guzman swiped hard as though parting the darkness; the blade connected with bone, crunching through Carson's fingers with ease.

Carson's curdled scream spliced through the uneasy stillness. Splinters of pain rushed up his arm to ignite nerve endings with a fiery touch, momentarily robbing him of breath. Instantly he felt light-headed; he thought he would pass out, but somehow he clung to consciousness and instinctively dipped and rolled away, from Guzman, clutching his bleeding, fingerless hand.

Guzman followed the sound and hacked through the gloom, just missing Carson's head. Then again, blind in the blackness.

But this time, rather than scramble, Carson just lay there in the dark and held his breath. Without discernible shadows, he knew Guzman couldn't see him. Without sounds to guide him, he was as blind and as vulnerable as Carson.

A fragile silence descended as the two men remained still, listening for each other.

The only sound Carson heard was the thud of his heartbeat loud in his ears, erratic and frightened, thinking any moment now that blade would come down with the force of a hammer and slice through his face and it would all be over.

But the minutes ticked into oblivion.

Carson's body sank into the damp earth. He felt the coolness of the ground through his soaked shirt and it somehow comforted him. Through the unbearable pain tearing at his mangled hand, he reflected on his misfortune, how he wished to God he'd never stepped foot in the dreary, run-down motel room to play poker three nights ago. He wished even more that he'd never been lured in the first place by Russian billionaire, Ilya Voronov, and his black-suited men.

High stakes, they said, but easy money.

Carson worked for a large paper consumables company, trying to set up corporate sales in Vegas, but he had failed miserably. Drink and gambling soon proved too much of an easy lure for someone entrenched in self-induced misery, even more so when the two men with Russian accents approached him in a casino, with an offer Carson simply couldn't resist.

What his wife didn't know wouldn't hurt her.

And so, for three nights in a row, Carson met with his Russian sponsors in a seedy hotel on the outskirts of the city, to play illegal card games. To his surprise, he had won several hands of poker. In those three days he'd gambled and played with more money than he had ever seen in his lifetime. The best thing was, he'd won more than he had betted and in doing so – he wasn't even sure how – he'd made a healthy profit.

At the back of his mind he knew he should have left the table while he was up on his luck, but greed remained a strange companion; squatting somewhere, unguarded, at the back of his conscience, growing fatter with need and with every game.

Much wanted more. Carson couldn't help himself.

When Voronov laid down more money in the prize fund, the shut off mechanism that should have told Carson to leave it and go home to his wife and children instead remained unmoved and stuck in its position. Temptation rose up like a seductive vapour to envelop and entice him.

The lure of more money kept him coming back. Eventually, only he and another man, Peter Guzman, remained at the table.

Carson remembered the tension on the final night; taut, like parched skin, as Voronov edged around the poker table. Dull lights illuminated half of his rounded, waxy face, which gave his skin a sinister hue.

“It’s obvious to me you’re both competitive men, you like a good game,” Voronov said. “So why don’t we make this evening a lot more interesting.” A statement of intention, not a question. He nodded to the burly guard in the corner, who brought over a large briefcase. He laid it on the table and stood back while Voronov moved over to the case and flicked the latches. “I have a challenge for you and it involves high stakes. But the return is priceless.”

He opened it, turned it around and showed Carson and Guzman the contents. “This is five million dollars. Take a look. Have a feel if you want.”

Carson looked at Voronov, then he caught a glance from Guzman. He saw the flash of lust.

“Five million dollars, gentlemen. It’s all yours if you accept my challenge. I’ll give five million more to the winner of the challenge.”

Carson stared at the money, heart stuttering. “Ten *million* dollars? Are you serious?”

“Quite serious, Mr Carson.”

“Well that’s all well and good, but it depends on what the challenge is,” Guzman said. “What exactly are you asking us to do?”

Voronov eyed both men. “You’re both the kind of men who love to make easy money. You wouldn’t be here otherwise. You love to make money because you don’t have much of it, you never have and that’s why you’re both hopeless gamblers.” He paused for emphasis. “Ten million dollars is a lot of money to gamblers like you two, yes?”

Carson couldn’t argue because it was a life-changing amount of money. His family could have anything they wanted and neither he nor his wife, Dee, would have to work again, or scratch around trying to save what little money they earned. Not only that, but his children would have secure futures at University.

He looked up at Voronov then. “What’s the catch? With that amount of money, there has to be a catch.”

Voronov smiled, solid and assured. “Of course there’s a catch. High stakes, remember, gentlemen?”

The cold feeling of doubt crept into Carson's veins and yet the urge to get his hands on the money proved a powerful lure, fogging his senses. He simply couldn't let the opportunity slip by; otherwise he'd regret it for the rest of his life.

"Count me in," he said, unaware of the beads of perspiration spotting on his brow.

Voronov turned to Guzman. "And what about you? Are you in?"

A hypnotic shake of the head followed. 'Not until I know what this is all about.'

Voronov went over to a desk in the corner, picked up a cigar and lit it. "Listen, you are both men struggling to make ends meet. You lead insignificant, monotonous lives; you're the shit on the shoes of everyone around you. You both have dead end jobs, no prospects and crap pay. You're both stuck in a self-perpetuating, deep rut."

He stared at Carson. "You're a lowly salesman with no sales to show for all that hard work, you have kids to feed and you owe two months' rent on your cramped little apartment."

Then he turned to Guzman. "And you're a drunk who threw his life down the toilet the moment your wife realised what a useless shit you were and left you. But you both have something in common; you both want to get out, you both want a better life and you'd do almost anything to get your hands on easy money to make that happen."

"You mentioned a catch," Guzman said, dismissive. To deflect Voronov's truth.

"So I did," Voronov said, smoking. "It's very simple. I'm gambling man, too, and I love competition, so if you really want this money, then you must compete against each other to get it."

Carson's eyes found Voronov's doughy face. "How to do you mean?"

"Some distance away from here, in the Nevada hills, there are some old disused mine shafts. They used them for gold mining. They're like rabbit warrens. They're full of all sorts of tools and weapons, placed there just for you. My considerably wealthy friends and I would like you to fight each other down there, but only one will be victorious, and only one may collect the money."

Carson looked concerned. "You said fight?"

Voronov smiled again, feigned. "Yes, fight." He paused. "To the death. There will be only one winner."

Guzman stood. "Christ, are you out of your mind?"

"On the contrary, gentlemen, I'm deadly serious."

Carson looked disdainful. "Is this how you and your rich Russian cronies get your kicks? Watching fights and betting on the outcome?"

Voronov looked away. "I have a vast fortune, Mr Carson; I can do anything I want."

Guzman's face creased. "And that includes making people fight to entertain you, to kill each other? That's horseshit. You're condoning murder, enabling it. Hell, you can count me out of this."

"That's your prerogative, Mr Guzman. Wave goodbye to the ten million on your way out." Voronov leaned in then, his eyes like burnished steel. "But don't think you'll leave this place with your heart beating, because that's not how we work, understand?"

Guzman jabbed a nicotine-stained finger. "Are you threatening me?"

The burly guard instantly yanked Guzman back into his seat.

"I'm just letting you know who you're dealing with, Mr Guzman. If you want a chance to walk out of here alive with ten million in your pocket, then you'll do as you're told. If not, you'll be taking a swift trip to the morgue, courtesy of Vladimir here. Now, do we understand each other?"

Guzman peered up at the guard, Vladimir. Then he looked to Voronov. "So basically we don't have a choice."

"Do we understand each other then?" Voronov asked again, insistent.

"No, I'm not playing your stupid game."

Voronov straightened and gestured to the guard.

Carson watched as the stocky man drew out a long blade and grabbed Guzman's head in a tight grip. He pushed the blade against Guzman's eyeball, teasing.

"How can you get away with something like that?" Carson wondered, fearful.

Voronov's baritone voice remained flat. "We can and we do, Mr Carson. We can make anyone disappear, for the right price."

Carson processed Voronov's words. Dread turned the insides of his veins cold. He shifted uncomfortably in his chair.

Voronov smoked his cigar, looked to Carson. "Ever seen someone's eyes dug out, Mr Carson?"

Carson shook his head, like a child afraid of his father.

"Well, now's your chance."

Guzman struggled against the guard. “No, Christ! Please, I’ll do whatever you want!”

Carson moved. “Let him go. We’ll do it. We’ll fight.”

Voronov gestured to the guard with a change of expression beneath lowered brows.

Without a pause, Vladimir pushed the knife directly into Guzman’s left eyeball and it popped, spewing aqueous liquid across his hand, followed by ribbons of blood. The membrane folded and dribbled from the socket.

Guzman would have screamed but for the massive hand clamped across his mouth, and instead the muffled noise sounded like a stifled childish whine.

It was Carson who shrieked, recoiling in his chair. “Jesus, Peter, tell him we’ll do it, tell him!”

He looked to Voronov, fraught. “We’ll do it.”

Carson remembered that as the twilight hours drew close, they bundled him into the back of the car with Guzman, shrouded by a hood over the head so they would have no idea where they were being taken, and they drove in silence to the mines.

However long the journey lasted – an hour maybe, Carson wasn’t sure – the fear of what was to come filled his guts to bursting point. He tried hard not to think about it, but he couldn’t stop it; one of them would soon die.

Steve Carson didn’t want to die. He couldn’t let that happen.

At the entrance to the mine, Voronov’s voice broke through their hoods. “There are no rules, gentlemen. Do what is necessary to win. You’re playing for high stakes, remember.”

* * *

The memory shuddered in Carson’s mind. His recollection of Voronov’s words – and the last four hours – drifted into the swirling silence, diluted by the chill in the air. He lay quite still, despite the burning pain across his knuckles where his fingers should have been.

The sound of Guzman’s feet through the mud thickened the air. He was close, but Carson thought the sound was drifting *away* from him, so he waited a few minutes before he sat up. Immediately he checked his left

hand, felt his thumb, still intact and three slimy stumps. His little finger hung by a sliver of muscle and skin, a useless lump of flesh.

“Christ...”

He clenched his teeth, sucked in a breath and ripped the rest of the digit from the hand.

That breath rushed from his lungs as though to expunge the pain, but somehow he managed to suffocate the scream.

Satisfied Guzman had moved away, Carson eased out of his soiled shirt and used the sleeves as a tourniquet and the rest of it as a bandage to stem the steady flow of blood from his hand. It was crude but effective. He got up and took in a deep breath to diffuse the terrible throb coursing up his arm, to calm the torrent of adrenaline poisoning him.

Somewhere from the blackened tunnels he heard Guzman mumbling as though maddened by the darkness.

Carson realised that in the in the melee he had dropped the iron bar. He scrabbled in the mud at his feet to find it, but without any light, the search yielded nothing.

Damn it.

Unarmed, and more fearful than ever, he ventured forward, arm outstretched, shuffling like an old man, unaware of the infrared CCTV cameras mounted in unobtrusive corners, watching his every move and relaying the pictures back to Voronov’s dingy, smoke filled hotel room, full with wealthy, expectant spectators.

Carson rested against a wall that felt a lot like a pillar of clay. As much as he balked at the idea, he could no longer keep running from Guzman in the pathetic hope that he’d escape, or that the big man would soon tire. However much he hated the idea – and he did, to the pit of his stomach – he knew he had to find Guzman and finish it. He desperately wanted to be back home with his wife and children, more so than he’d ever wanted anything in life, even Voronov’s money.

Greed, he thought then. *Look where it’s got you.*

Now a sickly terror crawled through his insides like a squall of spiders. Kill or be killed. High stakes, indeed.

He took in another deep breath and pushed forward, following the distant sounds echoing through the tunnels until the warm haze of ochre light punched through the blackness as though to soothe and guide him.

Reflections flickered. The smell of kerosene lingered.

He crept towards the light, saw a large cavern open up before him. Fiery torches burned bright from staves attached to giant wooden struts driven into the ground. Little remained of its days as a gold mine, other than the dark empty spaces that swallowed every minute sound.

Carson carefully gauged the shadows and the darkened corners, but there was no sign of Guzman. He eased forward, tentative, afraid Guzman would pounce, but only the faint crackle of the flames laced the hush. He figured Guzman had vanished down one of three tunnels leading from the chasm.

He looked around for a weapon to use, but there was nothing except pieces of rotted wood. That didn't matter to Carson; he finally had some light to his advantage, after spending hours in the blackness. Now he would be able to see Guzman. And if he could see him, he had a fighting chance of finishing him.

He moved up a mound of earth and mud, to where there were a dozen small stacked planks. Above, he noticed an old wooden track running through the cavern, supported by large, knotted beams. It reminded him of the old Cyclone rollercoaster on Cony Island. Above the track he saw a narrow platform. He wondered just how old the mines really were, how long they'd been abandoned and left to rot.

He straightened and called into the cumulative silence. "Peter? Come on, come and get me. Let's finish this." He watched the tunnels for any movement, but there was nothing discernible. "What are you waiting for? Come on. I'm right here, waiting."

Movement to his right. A shadow glided past the mouth of a tunnel.

Carson honed in on the movement, concentrated hard on the darkness that curtained the shaft.

Guzman slowly emerged from the dusk, the sword in his hand and his clothes spattered with Carson's blood.

Carson edged close to the planks of wood.

"I'm not letting you out of here alive," Guzman wheezed. "I can't."

"Funny, but you didn't say that back at the hotel room," Carson said. "You wanted out, remember?"

Guzman pointed to the bloodied bandage over his face. "That was before the stakes changed, before that crazy son of a bitch gouged my eye out. I want out, sure, but I want out of here alive. And I ain't leaving without that money."

“Then we both want the same thing, to get out alive,” Carson said, remaining calm as Guzman slowly approached. “But let’s just think about it for a moment. This isn’t right, we both know that. Let’s not do this. There has to be another way.”

“There isn’t. You heard Voronov. We don’t get out of here until one of us is dead.”

“But what if we both refuse?”

“Refuse what? To fight? Refuse the money?”

“Both,” Carson replied. “I don’t want to die any more than you do. Is this really worth ten million dollars? This is absurd, Peter, and you know it.”

“It may be absurd, but that’s the way it is. Besides, Voronov won’t let you walk out of here alive if you refuse; you know that. Either way, one of us is a dead man. There’s no way out, Carson, so stop being a whiny, frightened little shit and fight like a man. I’m sick of chasing your ass around these tunnels.”

Carson shrank in the face of Guzman’s rebuff. “That’s a shame; I rather hoped you’d see sense.”

Guzman stared at Carson, agitation clouding his sour expression. “No such thing as sense in this situation, so get used to it. I haven’t got time for this shit.”

He shot forward and scrambled up the mound.

Carson grabbed one of the planks with his right hand. He swung it hard as Guzman reached the top of the mound and it connected with the side of his head, splitting the perished wood. The dull *thwack* echoed around the cavern and Guzman toppled backward down the mound, dropping the sword into the dirt.

Carson spotted the sword and slid down the mud, desperate to get his hands on a useful – and dangerous – weapon at last, having spent the last few hours with nothing more than a rusty iron bar to protect him.

His fingers curled around the handle.

Guzman rolled at the bottom, saw Carson with the sword. He quickly got to his feet and scuttled away, heading for the shadows of a nearby tunnel.

Carson went after him, but he didn’t realise how low the lintels were in the tunnel until he ran headlong into one, the force rocking his head right

back and knocking him to the ground. He lay in the dirt for a moment, dazed.

Somewhere in the passage ahead he heard Guzman's heavy breathing licking the walls.

Carson got back to his feet and this time he kept low and followed the sounds into the darkness. Light dissipated the further he travelled into the tunnel, but he could just make out a rickety set of steps at the end of the shaft.

He held the sword out, ready, and ascended.

Each step creaked beneath his weight, like leather being stretched. The darkness grew thick as he climbed, until he could barely see a thing. Hairs along his arms and neck stood on end; vulnerability tingled across his sweat-laden skin. The fear of Guzman lurking in the dark mixed with the dread of the fragile wooden steps giving way, and it made him hurry.

At the top of the stairs he hesitated; listened. The dimness had become less dense and he could make out rudimentary shadows.

Sounds echoed from directly ahead.

Carson listened as silence gathered again and made his senses tingle.

He turned a corner, saw a shard of light that had found a path through the gloom; the glow of the torches lighting the cavern below. Before him, a wooden platform reached across the cave. Below he could see the old wooden track that traversed the grotto, but there was no sign of Guzman.

Dulled pain pulsed up his arm and made him wince. The end of his crudely bandaged hand had turned dark crimson.

He hesitated by the platform; clammy fear fingering his senses, but then, from the shadows, Guzman heaved into view and threw something at Carson. It wasn't until it strafed across his face that he realised it was a length of rope, fashioned into a lasso.

Carson swiped at the rope with the sword, but he missed and it slipped from his fingers, dropping onto the ground below.

"Shit..."

Guzman immediately wrapped the rope around Carson's neck and pulled hard, stealing his breath.

With only one good arm, Carson couldn't shift Guzman's grip, but instead he used his body weight and heaved forward onto the platform, pulling Guzman down with him. Both men struggled on the narrow slats,

making the structure sway. Guzman lost grip of the rope and slipped from Carson, but he managed to cling onto a slat, dangling above the tracks.

Air rushed down Carson's throat and he lay prostrate, coughed up blood and saliva.

Then he noticed something on the platform, flat against the wood.

He moved, ignoring Guzman clinging to the slats.

The gnarled timber groaned beneath his weight as he crawled forward along the platform.

His eyes dilated when he saw it; a rusty old saw.

Guzman clambered back up the platform, noticed Carson with the saw.

Carson gingerly got to his feet, but he knew a fight on an unstable, half-rotted platform could mean trouble and instead he turned from Guzman and carefully made his way along the platform to the other side.

Guzman got to his feet, but unlike Carson, he ignored the danger and hurried across the timbers.

Carson heard Guzman coming up behind him, breath heavy, and it made him break into a run, but several slats gave way beneath his weight and he faltered, almost dropped through the gap.

Guzman seized the opportunity and threw the rope towards Carson, desperately hoping to snare him, but the slats beneath Carson's feet gave way completely and he dropped down on the rusty tracks twenty feet below amid a swirling dust cloud.

Senses fizzed for a moment before Carson realised what had happened. He spun round, expecting Guzman to be standing over him, but instead he saw something dangling from the broken laths.

Guzman reached out, eyes and veins bulging above the rope biting into his neck.

Carson watched him, mesmerised by Guzman's deathly helplessness. He followed the rope up to the protruding slat, saw that it had become snagged and the noose that the big man had crudely shaped to ensnare Carson had now become entangled around Guzman's neck.

Carson could have left him to simply die, but he thought back to the moment they became trapped in the tunnels, remembered how Guzman had sliced into his shoulder with the sword and then severed the fingers from his left hand. He thought about being face down in the mud, praying to Christ

that he'd somehow get out alive while hiding from Guzman like a frightened rabbit.

Then he thought about the money; the ten million dollars.

The fear and adrenaline quickly gave way to seduction and the lure of money.

He reached down and picked up the saw.

Guzman gurgled and struggled against the rope cutting through his skin. Violet tinted clouds of fear coloured his eyes.

Carson gripped the saw and held it so that Guzman could clearly see it. He wanted him to see it, wanted Guzman to see his face, his expression, and the colour of revenge; what it felt like to have fear rip through him, the same kind of fear he felt while being chased through cold, dark tunnels.

Guzman writhed against the taut rope, the foul smell of his fright ripe against the cold stillness. He tried to talk, but the rope had crushed his larynx. Air couldn't get into or out of his lungs.

Carson waited just long enough for the lack of air to sufficiently weaken Guzman. He moved, held the saw near the rope, as though to slice through it.

Guzman glanced at Carson, hopeful.

Carson's expression changed.

"Sorry Peter, but I can't let you live. I got too much to lose. You never showed any mercy to me when you hacked my fingers off and sliced me, so what makes you think you deserve it?"

He placed the saw just above the rope coiled tight against Guzman's throat and started sawing into his soft, swollen flesh.

Peter Guzman tried to scream, but couldn't. Then he tried pushing the blade away, but quickly tired as ruddy puddles spilled from the jagged wound.

Carson's cold determination overrode the need to vomit at such a sight and he continued sawing as Guzman convulsed and thrashed, but that simply made it easier for Carson to claw through muscle and sinew and finally reach the spine.

He watched, horrified and yet mesmerised as Guzman's engorged tongue whipped back and forth in his mouth against the overload of pain; a peculiar reflex.

Arterial spray washed across Carson's face, but he ignored it and hacked at Guzman's neck, spurious determination fuelled by the primal

need to survive. The sound of blood splattering against the rails seemed loud in the cavern, loud against Carson's ears, but he pushed the jagged blade harder against the bone, until finally, the sound of tearing flesh filled the cave and gravity wrenched the body from the head. It dropped to the floor below.

The head – eyes still shuttering – listed and turned over, still attached to the rope.

Carson dropped the saw and staggered back.

Air rushed up his throat and he almost screamed, but instead, the vomit he'd kept down for so long exploded from his mouth in a spiteful spurt. After a few minutes it stopped, although he continued to retch for a while.

His torso and head ached from the force of heaving so much and he crawled across the tracks and found solace in the shadows. He slumped against a wall and stared into the saffron haze. The silence quickly came to press against him, insistent, but it wasn't the silence that bothered Carson, so much as the images and sounds that rushed through his head, over and over.

The pain in his left arm coursed through every cell and fibre. Christ, what the hell was he going to tell his wife? How would he explain it to the doctors once he got to hospital, if he ever got out of there?

Something sat heavy on his chest; such burden. But Carson knew exactly what he had done; he knew exactly why he had done it – why he had to do it. Kill or be killed. It was that simple. An impossible situation.

Survival, he thought then. *I did it to survive.*

He'd already concocted a story in his mind; what he'd tell people. He'd won big at a card game, got drunk, but the card sharks came after him and tried to kill him and through sheer luck he managed to get away.

Lies. All lies. That way, he could abdicate responsibility.

* * *

Two hours later, Steve Carson walked from the suffocating darkness of the old gold mine and emerged into a fading twilight. A silky slip of light had already radiated across the horizon; daylight in its infancy. Flat, dusty landscape stretched into the distance, spotted by gnarly, barren trees silhouetted against the emerging sun.

He had no idea how far away he was from the nearest town, and he remembered the drive from Vegas took well over an hour. But the long walk back to normality didn't bother Carson. It didn't matter, because he had the money, ten million dollars.

He gripped the briefcase and made his way from the entrance to the mine. He paused momentarily to look back, thinking about Guzman lying at the bottom of the cavern, headless torso spilling its contents across the dirt. It was unlikely his body would be found any time soon, if at all.

He should have felt remorse; that he'd killed another man, but he didn't. He should have felt the tenuous threads of guilt, but he didn't. He didn't feel anything, because he'd fought for his ten million dollars and he'd won.

And that's all that mattered to Steve Carson.

In reality, he'd killed for self-indulgence, not survival. He smiled then, but even as the sense of greed and want bubbled in his blood, he couldn't see beyond the darkness that awaited him, what lay, inescapable, beyond his understanding.

Death still stalked him.

He would have to live with that dreadful moment forever.

EPHEMERAL NOTIONS

George Wilhite

Their first portent that morning was the blackening of the sky. Not due to dark clouds suggesting a coming storm but from the sudden inexplicable flock of thousands of birds.

Janet and Ryan had spent the night at the beach in their small secret cave. The rangers never seemed to find them there, forcing them to leave after nightfall, so they often enjoyed the solitude the Northern California coastline offered from the chaos of both of their families.

Twenty one and nineteen years of age respectively, they could stay out all night even though they both still lived at home. Janet was the oldest of three siblings. Ryan was stuck in the middle of five children. Their parents mostly ignored them as long as they stayed out of trouble.

Janet set the alarm on her cell phone since Ryan had to work the next morning. It faithfully played Linkin Park at six thirty but when they awoke the day was mysteriously dark. It was the middle of summer and there was no fog that morning, but the sun was not streaming into the cave as expected.

Ryan pulled on his jeans and walked onto the beach to investigate. He heard Janet scream behind him at the same moment he saw the hideous collective of birds.

Seagulls and crows, sparrows and pelicans, many other species he could not name, in a chaotic swarm. It was not a flocking with purpose. The birds swirled around in a confused muddle, in all directions at once, even attacked each other. They seemed to be fleeing from somewhere or something.

Right out of that freaking Hitchcock movie, Ryan mused, *only way worse*. Even old Hitch left out the repulsive detail playing out on the beach. Blood and shit descended from the unnatural gathering above in a rain of repugnance.

They ran back to the protection of the cave assuming this scene of horror would pass soon, but remained huddled in there for nearly three hours hearing the screeching of the possessed creatures above, smelling the putrid waste covering the sand of their favorite beach, shaking in fear wondering *what the birds were running from*.

* * *

They had to make several trips from the beach to their car to gather enough sea water to clear the windows so they could drive.

The second portent came when Ryan called in late to work and they both tried all the phone numbers for every member of their families—no calls were completed.

Once the birds passed by, the sky was filled with the abundant sunshine they had expected upon waking. The beaches were deserted and it was nearly ten in the morning--the third portent.

They stopped counting at three. There was now no doubt something was very wrong.

* * *

Driving the twenty minutes from the beach to Cape Richards, the first small town on their journey home, only two cars passed them on the opposite side of the road. Like the flock of birds, those motorists were hauling ass.

“Why are we still going that way?” Janet asked.

“We need some answers.” Ryan kept driving in that direction for the time being. “I’m not going to run from something if I don’t even know what it is.”

Janet didn’t say what she was thinking. *And if it’s too late once we know?* She didn’t say anything at all because she had no better plan to suggest.

* * *

Cape Richards was deserted.

“Can we go back where we came from now?” Janet pleaded. “This was no help.”

“Not quite true,” Ryan answered. He was walking into the small store that sold salt water taffy and souvenirs, his vision clearly fixated on something within.

Janet never saw Ryan again.

She made the fateful decision of following in his footsteps.

When she reached the doorway, she saw the thing that had attracted his attention.

They just stopped here the previous afternoon so the horror in the store had developed in less than twenty four hours.

Yesterday, Old Man Quincy had greeted them with his usual grin, showing his mostly toothless grotesque mouth. Add to that ugly maw his cold and dark grey eyes and the fact he was missing an arm and you would have the ingredients of some urban legend to scare kids around campfires if he wasn't so jovial and polite to counteract his monstrous qualities.

Quincy was still present in his store—*sort of*. Janet gaped at the Quincy-thing now stuck into the wall, held suspended in the air by a gelatinous adhesive covering the entire store. The thick ooze was a yellow-green--glowing brightly, it smelled like sewage.

"Ryan?" Janet managed to say, trembling and feeling like she would faint any moment.

The Quincy-thing still had his features, but they were severed and spread out on the wall in random order. Tentacles slithered in the ooze and throughout Quincy's body parts like sutures stitching him back together into a new blasphemous arcane construction.

Its mouth spoke in Quincy's voice, but hushed and strained. "I'm so sorry," he said. A second later, she felt a blow to the back of her head. Her final thought was something had whipped her—*one of those tentacles?*—but that was all the time it took for everything to go black.

* * *

By two o'clock that afternoon, the highway along the coast was flooded with cars. City dwellers fled the horrors experienced thus far that mid-summer day. Birds fell from the sky, their pets went berserk and then that putrid ooze was suddenly everywhere, creating monsters as though there was actually prescient intelligence behind the randomness of its havoc.

The travelers drove up the coastline, mulling over the many theories humans can't help but posit when faced with the uncanny.

Perhaps some virus has been unleashed . . .

Maybe the pollution in the cities created this vile ooze . . .

Certainly there is some hope to be found in more remote locations . . .

It can't be this way everywhere . . .

* * *

The infinitesimal fractions left of Ryan and Janet, splayed across Cape Richards and beyond, merged with this entity from some other realm, were aware of the worthless musings of these would-be pilgrims on the road holding fast to a conviction only humans can grasp, a concept called *faith*.

Only moments after their assimilation into this monster asserting its will against humanity, one soul at a time, Janet and Ryan were amazed to realize such notions are in actuality quite ephemeral.



DINAH

Kevin L. Jones

Someone loudly and persistently knocked at his door. Bill warily opened one eye, his head throbbing from last night's drink. His mouth tasted of booze and bile. The bed he laid prone on stank of cheap perfume but the girl that he vaguely remembered picking up had vanished. The only evidence that she had really been here at all, other than her scent, were the crumpled black panties that he still clutched in his hand. The knocking continued; it sounded as if whoever was on his porch would soon bang his door from its hinges. Bill warily crawled from bed as the room began to spin around him. He scanned the untidy floor and saw a pair of discarded blue jeans. With great difficulty he pulled them on and rushed to the front door as fast as his hung over condition would allow. When he finally answered he saw his older brother standing before him. His left cheek was bandaged and the skin surrounding it was swollen and discolored. At his side was the tiny form of Bill's five year old niece. Her eyes were red like she had been crying all morning. Clutched in her little hands was a white Persian cat that had the largest pale blue eyes that he had ever seen. Bill motioned for them to enter the apartment.

"Sorry it took me so long to answer." He looked down at his wristwatch. "Geez it's already one o'clock. Sorry about that, I must have slept in."

His brother sniffed the stench of booze on his breath and gave him a disapproving look. Bill ignored him and reached for the pack of cigarettes on his coffee table. After he lit up and took his first drag he asked, "So what's with your face? Did your old lady beat you up or something?"

His brother shook his head in disgust and grumbled, "It was that damned stray that my daughter found. She attacked me."

Bill reached down and stroked the head of the cat that his niece still held in her arms. It purred happily. "Why, I don't believe that. This sweet little kitty doesn't look like it could hurt a fly."

His brother held his hand up to his bandaged face. "Believe me, that thing's vicious. I don't want it in my house. It's a good thing you decided to take her in or I would have taken it to the pound and had it put to sleep"

Hearing this, his niece burst into tears. Bill knelt down. “Don’t cry, honey, no one’s going to hurt your kitty. You know, when I was little we had cats and they were my best friends.”

His niece’s tears slowly subsided and she reluctantly handed her cat to her uncle. “Here, take her. She’s named Dinah and I love her but my poppa says I can’t keep her because she’s bad.”

Bill took the offered feline and stroked her gently. The cat purred and rubbed against his chest. “I’ll take good care of Dinah for you, sweetie and you can come over and visit her whenever you like.”

This seemed to brighten his niece’s spirits a little. After a brief visit, Bill’s brother took his child by the hand and led her from the apartment. As she left she waved goodbye to Dinah.

After they had departed Bill sat down on the couch where Dinah had curled up in a ball. He looked down at the resting cat and mumbled, “You don’t look the least bit vicious to me.”

He went out to the kitchen and poured Dinah a saucer of milk. The cat leapt off of the sofa and hurried towards its meal. As Bill watched it greedily lap up the white liquid he told Dinah that after he got some more sleep he would go down to Wal-Mart and get her a flea collar, a litter box, cans of cat food and anything else she needed.

He went back to his room and flopped back on the bed. Almost as soon as his head hit the pillow he drifted into a deep dreamless sleep. The phone ringing on his nightstand awoke him several hours later. He lifted the receiver. At first whoever was on the other end of the line said nothing; all Bill could hear was a low sobbing. He mumbled, “Hello, who is this?”

“It’s Jenny, Bill.” It was his sister in law. He wondered what in the world could she want. After an awkward silence she blurted out, “Bill, it’s your brother. He’s dead!”

“What did you say? What are you talking about? How did this happen?”

She started to cry again. It took her several minutes for her to regain her composure enough for her to speak. “He collapsed a while ago. We took him to the hospital but he died a few hours later. The doctors don’t know what caused it, they are still running tests.”

Bill asked, “Where are you?”

“At St. Elizabeth’s Hospital.”

“Alright, let me get dressed and I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

He sat on the edge of his bed in the gloomy room. The sun had already begun to sink below the horizon. For a long while he did not move, he kept hoping that he would wake and it would all just be a horrible nightmare. Then he heard it. The sound of a woman's cruel laughter coming from the front room. He rose and cautiously crept towards the strange emanation. He looked around his living room but saw no one but then he turned his eyes towards the kitchen where he saw the shadow of a woman floating along the wall.

He called out, "Who's there?" but got no response in return.

He rushed into the kitchen but there was no woman there, only Dinah. As he studied the cat he noticed something that defied reason. Dinah was casting a slender woman's shadow. Bill slowly backed away and sunk down on a recliner in the living room. He tried to make himself believe that he had just imagined the strange shadow. As he sat trembling he watched Dinah leap onto the kitchen counter. She stared at him with her strange blue eyes. The cat's gaze was hypnotic. He wanted to look away but found that he could not. As he stared into its eyes, a hideous grin spread across the cat's face. To Bill she looked like a nightmare version of the Cheshire Cat. He tried to rise and flee from the horrible little beast but no matter how hard he struggled he couldn't move. Unseen hands pinned him firmly to the chair. As he thrashed violently, trying to free himself, cracks began to appear in his hardwood floor. The crevices widened and sections of it began to fall inward. His couch and coffee table sank from view. They fell into a seemingly endless dark void. Bill could feel the boards giving away beneath him. He screamed in terror as the floor around him began to crumble. The force that sucked him down was incredible. It was like being pulled into a black hole's gravity well. The last thing that Bill heard before he disappeared forever into the darkness was a terrible woman's laughter echoing from behind Dinah's horrible unnatural smile. The apartment was now dark and still. Everything had returned to its former state. Dinah leapt down from the kitchen counter and made her way to the front door. Slowly it opened, seemingly of its own accord. The white cat slipped out into the cool night air and faded into the darkness in search of a new home. She knew that someone would take her in, they always did.

MY HOME

Konstantine Paradias

I don't live in the same house where I was born. This one is bigger and has four bedrooms, while the one where I was born had only two and me and my brothers, we all stayed in one. Now we have one room for Mom, one for Dad, one for me and one for my brother. It's less crowded now, after my other brother died. We were very sad when the rain made him sick, but at least I have the room all to myself now.

The house where I live has a bigger living room with lots of pretty furniture that my Mom likes, but my Dad only likes the couch and the thing that you put the TV on. He also likes the footstool with the red cover, the one he puts his feet on without taking his shoes off when Mom is not there so she won't yell at him.

Our kitchen is also big and my Mom likes it a lot, because it has many tools and she likes to arrange them like the alphabet. Sometimes she arranges them based on their size and then she argues with Dad if he moves them and she has us call her Julia, although her real name is Martha. This one time I asked my Dad why she has us call her that and why she moves the furniture around when we call her Julia, but he said something about her sister and then he had her sleep in the basement. Julia's room must be down there, so our house has 5 bedrooms after all.

I have never seen the basement, but my Dad seems to like it, because he spends a lot of time down there and sometimes we hear loud music, so he probably has his old music tapes down there, because when we asked him he said that he has an old stereo and he doesn't feel like bringing it upstairs because it's big and he goes there so that our Mom won't bother him when he wants to listen to music. I think he's lying, because every time he comes back up his hair is a mess and he's full of dirt and then he and Mom go to one of their bedrooms and they fight, because I can hear them shout. One day my Dad came out and Mom started chasing him and she got one of her knives, the alphabetic ones, and was yelling about that whore Julia. My Dad must have said something about Julia to my Mom and she was confused, probably because she hadn't noticed the way the knives were arranged.

In our house we have this big loft, with a very big, round window that my Mom (Martha) calls a skylight and we go there and look outside when there's nothing on TV. We used to hang out by the porch window with Mom and Dad and my two brothers (including the one who died) and we used to watch the ash fall on the city from the sky, along with the rain. Sometimes we saw people run inside their houses to find cover from the rain, but in the end, they all stayed inside their houses and never went out, just like we did. That's a good thing, because in the morning we usually had to help Dad clean them away from our yard and they smelled bad and broke in our arms and made us dirty and my Mom was yelling and arguing with my father.

We liked watching the city outside, because the big buildings were still standing and the sun shone through their windows and made them look like huge flutes. At some point we had gotten close and heard the wind blow through them and it sounded like god playing the flute, as my brother used to say. I guess god must have been really good at playing the flute, because it started raining afterward and we couldn't get back home in time and my brother gave me his coat to cover myself and the rain got him and then we carried him home inside his coat and buried him.

My new house is bigger than my old one, but I liked the old one better. In the new house it's quiet in the evening, but sometimes we hear something meowing under the staircase in the evenings and sometimes my brother wakes up and starts shouting and Martha (or sometimes Julia) comes over and tells him to shut it. But my brother can never remember what he opened in the first place, so it takes some time for him to stop shouting. When we ask Dad what's making the purring noise he tells us it's nothing and then tells us not to go under the staircase. I don't get it, though. If it's nothing, then why does he bother with all those padlocks under the staircase? And why does Mom (or Julia) not let us finish our lunch sometimes, when the purring gets louder?

One day me and my brother went downstairs and knocked on the door, but we got no answer. I guess there's nothing under the staircase, after all. But when we told Dad about it, he spanked us because "we knew why" and then he went and peeked through the door and he argued with my Mom, and then she took our lunch and tossed it through a hole on the door.

After that, my brother went back down one day and stuck his hand inside the hole, because if it was nothing, then nothing bad would happen to him, but then he started crying and when he pulled his hand out he had only

three fingers left and there was blood and he was screaming and then came Mom and Dad, who was covered in dirt, and Mom's name was Julia and they bandaged his hand and we didn't get anything to eat for lunch or dinner that time either.

In my room though there is a hole to the kitchen and sometimes I can hear Mom or Julia through it. So one day I was sitting there, when I was heard Mom and Dad say that we were running out of food, they were whispering but they wanted to yell and Mom said the children weren't hers, they were Julia's and that he ruined her life and my Dad said she was crazy and couldn't take it anymore and that the world was over, accept it, you goddam bitch and stuff like that. So he told my Mom that we were eating too much food and they'd have to get rid of us. They said that my brother was hurt bad and wouldn't last through the night and he'd eat a lot more food to get better and wouldn't just die like that. And my Mom and Julia agreed and they said fine, let's get rid of them.

So that's when I went and told my brother and we snuck down to the basement together while our parents were asleep and we held our breath and turned on the gas tank and got the big shears that my Dad used to carve the meat he had wrapped in black bags in the big basement fridge and we cut the chains and locks and opened the door under the staircase and then left the house. We decided to go back to our old house, it was smaller, but now that our parents would die we'd have the place all to ourselves.

We heard Julia and Dad scream from inside the house and then Dad must have grabbed his shotgun or something like that, because Julia shouted "No! Those filthy brats have turned on the gas!" The house caught on fire and exploded and we heard something else screaming too, and it wasn't Julia or Dad. We felt a bit bad for doing that, but if we hadn't, we would have been eaten by Mom or Dad or the monster, because that's what it must have been.

We went back to our house and we're still together, me and my brother, we live in separate rooms now, but we're running out of food and my brother isn't feeling well and he'll probably die soon so at least I'll get to have some more.

RANDOM THOUGHTS

Dorothy Davies

It's boring lying here, nothing to do but think. I started dwelling on that silly old song about the worms that crawl in and out, how they crawl in thin and crawl out stout – and I started thinking about worms, cans of worms.

So tell me, whoever is listening, what is it with the 'can of worms' metaphor? My questions are as follows:

Who thought up the idea of putting worms in a can?

Why did anyone think it was a good idea to put worms in a can?

How did they collect the worms to go into the can?

How many worms can you get in a can?

How many cans of worms did they think they could sell?

Did they think others would want to buy/eat the worms?

What do worms taste like?

How much is a can of worms...

There are just so many questions you can ask without getting answers – there are no answers, so I must switch my questions.

Someone said the dead had no need of blood.

My question here is – what happens to those who do?

You see, I do...

And I want out of here before the damn worms come crawling.

Anyone want to give me a hand to get out of here?

No reward, just the thrill of doing a good deed for the day. There are not enough zombies in the world; the world is in desperate need of another one.

Me.

MEET THE AUTHORS:

Dene Bebbington works in IT but his real passion is writing. He has a particular penchant for writing horror fiction and has had stories published in various anthologies, and last year he published a novelette for the Kindle called *Zombie Revelations*. This year should see his second Kindle ebook - *Stonefall* - published. More info at his website: www.denebebbington.co.uk.

Thomas Brown is a graduate of the University of Southampton, where he studied MA Creative Writing. Literary influences include Friedrich Nietzsche, Poppy Z. Brite and Thomas Ligotti. He writes dark, surreal fiction.

Nicola Cuti was born on October 29, 1944 in Brooklyn, New York, the first of two male children of Alphonso Gitano Cuti, a darkroom technician, and Laura Antoinette Sica, a housewife. His grandparents had emigrated from Italy in the 1930's to make a home in America.

Nick worked as editor, artist and writer for such distinguished comic book companies as DC, Marvel, Charlton and Warren (publisher of "Creepy" and "Vampirella" comics) and as a background designer for Hollywood studios such as the Walt Disney Company, Universal, Sony Pictures, Paramount and MGM. He created numerous characters including superhero "E-Man" and the underground classic, "Moonie", which has appeared in men's magazines in full color and in her own novels and a graphic novel. She was released as a movie "Moonie and the Spider Queen", which is on sale on Amazon.com. He is a two-time winner of the Ray Bradbury Award for writing excellence and a 2009 Inkpot Award winner for his work in Comic Book Art.

Dorothy Davies is a writer, editor, medium, lives and works on the Isle of Wight, said to be the most haunted place in the UK. This could account for her overwhelming interest in all things horror. She has an online presence at: www.dorothydavies.co.uk

Sandra Davies is a recently-emerged writer of fiction and a printmaker, both of which combine in the recently published 'The Blacksmith's Wife' and 'Edge: curve, arc, circle', a coming-of-age tale set in Neolithic Orkney.

In production are books 1 and 2 of what will be a trilogy of romance-with-murderous-undertones - "A Step So Grave" and "Longest Shadows Reach." Also to be published during 2014 is "Making Good", the fourth in a family saga which includes "Theme for a Summer," "Reunion" and "Holding Steady" [now available as a compendium with bonus prequel, "One That Got Away"]. Details of these can be found at <http://www.lulu.com/spotlight/SandraDavies>. Short stories and poetry are also to be found in "February Femmes Fatales"; "Sunday Snaps the stories" and Pigeon Bike's "Beyond the Broken Bridge."

Lawrence Falcetano is a former police officer who enjoys writing mystery and horror fiction and lives in New Jersey. His work has been published in numerous anthologies as well as online and in print magazines. He became interested in writing as a young student, after having been introduced to the stories of Edgar Allan Poe. His short story, "Morena's Revenge" is his homage to the author.

Timothy Frasier is a novelist, short story writer, and poet. His work appears in several anthologies by Static Movement, James Ward Kirk Publishing, and Thirteen Press. He is a member of The Splatterpunk Saints and has stories in their Red Cross charity anthology, *Splatterpunk Saints 2013*. Frasier lives in rural Kentucky with his wife, Lisa, and German shepherd, Chief.

Ken Goldman, former Philadelphia teacher of English and Film Studies, is an affiliate member of the Horror Writers Association. He has homes on the Main Line in Pennsylvania and at the Jersey shore, depending on his need for a tan. His stories have appeared in over 700 independent press publications in the U.S, Canada, the UK, and Australia with over thirty due for publication in 2014. Since 1993 Ken's tales have received seven honorable mentions in The Year's Best Fantasy & Horror. He has written five books : three anthologies of short stories, *YOU HAD ME AT ARRGH!! : FIVE UNEASY PIECES BY KEN GOLDMAN* (Sam's Dot Publishers); *DONNY DOESN'T LIVE HERE ANYMORE* (A/A Productions), and *Star-Crossed* (Vampires 2); a novella, *DESIREE*, (Damnation Books); and most recently, a novel, *OF A FEATHER* (Horrific Tales Publishing). Ken's stories and books are available with a little online surfing. Reviewers are always welcome -- even the negative ones.

Danica Green spends her time writing, playing video games and lamenting that her job involves neither of the former. She has been published in Smokelong Quarterly and Horror For Good: A Charitable Anthology which was a finalist in the Bram Stoker Awards. There are others, but she won't bore you by listing them.

John X. Grey is the pen name of Southern Ohio native Edwin Ray Haney, writing fiction since 1999, his short stories and poems published at various small presses or web sites starting in November 2009 and five novels from August 2011 – October 2012. In May 2013, he released a short story collection called *The Orphaned Stories of John X. Grey* through CreateSpace. His new horror novel trilogy, *The Nightmare of Aarontown*, has been tentatively accepted for 2014-15 publication at Dark Moon Press. For more about Grey's work, visit his author pages (<http://themanymundsofjohnxgrey.weebly.com/>) at Weebly.com or (<http://www.amazon.com/-/e/B004E5AHE6>) Amazon.com.

A J Humpage has been writing for 28 years. She has many short stories, flash fiction and poetry published in anthologies with 6 Sentences, Pill Hill Press, Static Movement and many e-zines such as Thrillers Killers 'n' Chillers. She gives advice about writing on her blog, <http://allwritefictionadvice.blogspot.com>, as well as writing articles on fiction writing for various magazines. Her first novel, *Blood of the Father*, is available on Amazon Kindle. You can also find her on Twitter: @AJHumpage. She works full time and lives in the UK with her family.

Ken L. Jones has been professionally writing for several decades. Although he has written everything from Donald Duck comic books to putting words in the mouth to Freddy Krueger in the movies he likes to think of himself first, last, and always as a poet.

Kevin L. Jones comes from a lifetime of experience in the popular arts. He has in the last two years widely published at such companies as Static Movement, Panic Press, Red Skies Press, Horrified Press and Rainstorm Press where he has gained great notice for his many works of short horror fiction. A collection of his horror stories called *Uncle Tickle and Other Stories* which is available at Lulu.

W B Kek is a poet from Trier, Germany, who also writes fiction, usually of a dark nature. His work is difficult for collectors to find but occasionally surfaces, such as in this story. He is a naturalized American citizen and travels extensively seeking inspirations for his words. He cites Rainer Maria Rilke, Herman Hesse, and Edgar Allan Poe as favorite writers.

Rebecca Kovar laments the loss of gloves and hats as social convention and the wearing of corsetry as a daily habit. She has been known to wield a wicked sword and a vicious red pen and is a champion of the proper use of commas. Many years ago, she ran away and joined the next best thing to a circus, which taught her how to survive in almost any environment and made clear the importance of asking the right questions. She likes her monsters monstrous rather than angst-ridden and doesn't mind if they aren't all that pretty. Given a choice between blood and treacle, she'll pick blood every time. She writes short dark stories, longer urban fantasy, and the occasional steamy romance. She currently spends her days righting wrongs and her nights writing them.

Jordan Elizabeth Mierek is represented by Belcastro Agency. Her short stories and poetry are published in Wagonbridge Publishing's ghost story anthology *13 Haunting Tales*, *Short Story Me*, *Danse Macabre*, *Bewildering Stories*, *Writing Raw*, *Dark and Dreary Magazine*, *Storyhouse*, *the Magical Library*, *RiverSedge*, and *AboutTeens*. Her work has won awards in *The XPress* and Utica Writers Club. She writes a monthly column for *New Hartford Life* magazine and is the current president of the Utica Writers Club. She maintains JordanElizabethMierek.com and is active on WattPad, <http://wattpad.com/JordanMierek>.

Marietta Miles has published stories through Thrills, Kills and Chaos, Flash Fiction Offensive and Revolt Daily. Her writing can be found in anthologies available through Static Movement Publishing and Horrified Press. Most recently she has contributed stories to anthologies edited by Lily Childs and Paul D. Brazil.

Todd Ocvirk is a graduate of the USC Cinema School where he was honored to have Hong Kong action director John Woo as his mentor during his senior year. His filmmaking credits include co-writing and co-directing the indie cult horror flick KOLOBOS and producing the indie zombie opus GANGS OF THE DEAD. Other experience includes a stint in Shanghai, China working on scripts for a kids puppet show. He also co-authored the comic book SONG OF SAYA, released through IDW Publishing and based on the Japanese visual novel SAYA NO UTA. Currently, he's writing, producing and directing a historical documentary called HAWAII SONS OF THE CIVIL WAR.

Konstantine Paradias is a jeweler by profession and a writer by choice. His work has been published in the Unidentified Funny Objects! 2 Anthology, Third FlatIron's Lost Worlds Anthology and The Battle Royale-Slam Book by Haikasoru. His short story, "The Grim" is nominated for a PushCart award and his other comedic time travel piece "How You ruined Everything" has been included in the Tangent 2013 recommended reading sf list.

David S. Pointer currently resides in Murfreesboro, TN. He has work included in volumes V & VI for Georgia and Tennessee in The Southern Poets Anthology Series. Moreover, his work can be found in "Dreadful Legacies," anthology and elsewhere. He can be reached at dspointer@hotmail.com.

Gene Stewart is a writer and artist. He currently lives in the Midwest American Wilderness where he is researching tales of mystical realism, writing ficta mystica, and exploring the dark by casting a little light into the shadows. His website is genestewart.com/wordpress where there are many samples of his work and much else; come explore.

George Wilhite was raised on a steady diet of horror and science fiction from the late Seventies forward. An avid fan of both Poe and Lovecraft, who he considers his greatest influences. He is the author of two horror collections -- the self-published "On the Verge of Madness" and "Silhouette of Darkness," an e-book from Musa Publishing. A member of the Horror Writers Association since 2009, he serves as editor of Thirteen Press and was an editor and frequent contributor to many anthologies

for Static Movement. He is currently working on his first novel and assembling a third collection. You can keep in touch with him at his blog: <http://georgewilhite.blogspot.com>.

Lee Clark Zumpe, an entertainment columnist with Tampa Bay Newspapers, earned his bachelor's in English at the University of South Florida. His nights are consumed with the invocation of ancient nightmares, dutifully bound in fiction and poetry. His work has been seen in magazines such as *Weird Tales*, *Space and Time* and *Dark Wisdom*, and in anthologies including *Horrors Beyond*, *Corpse Blossoms*, *High Seas Cthulhu* and *Cthulhu Unbound Vol. 1*. Visit www.leeclarkzumpe.com.

Robert W. Zailo works in a variety of styles from illustrations, storyboards, comic books, cartooning, caricatures and scenic paintings. Some of his work can be seen in such places as Disneyland, Knott's Berry Farm, and Disneyland Tokyo. He holds classes that teach through the art programs of various cities, commercial venues and in the public school system. He currently is doing story illustration for several independent companies with books due out shortly and can also be seen on the web.



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Kevin I. Jones comes from a lifetime of experience in the popular arts. He has in the last two years widely published at such companies as Static Movement, Panic Press, Red Skies Press, Rainstorm Press and Horrified Press where he has gained great notice for his many works of short horror fiction.

Ken L. Jones has been professionally writing for several decades. Although he has written everything from Donald Duck comic books to putting words in the mouth of Freddy Krueger in the movies, he likes to think of himself first, last, and always as a poet.



George Wilhite has been an aficionado of the horror genre since his youth, staying up late watching Creature Features with his father led to his own experiments with writing stories and scholarly work in college as well. He is the author of the collections "On the Verge of Madness" and "Silhouette of Darkness" and many stories online or in print anthologies. He currently edits for Thirteen Press and is working on his first novel, the beginning of the series "Intrepid City."

Blog):

"Long Intervals of Horrible Sanity"
<http://georgewilhite.blogspot.com/?zx=3f4a768200d0e131>



Dorothy Davies lives and works on the enchanting haunted Isle of Wight, from where she collates, organises and delights in preparing anthologies of dark stories from talented authors who are scattered around the world. She has many short stories, articles, photographs and novels in her publishing CV. The Skullface Chronicles will be the next addition.



AT THE STROKE OF
THIRTEEN

